

Aide-de-Camp's Library



Rashtrapati Bhavan
New Delhi

Accn. No. 447

Call No. IX (b) - H



Aide-de-Camp's Library

THE HAZARD MESH

THE HAZARD MESH

by

LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER
J. A. C. HUGILL

D.S.C., R.N.V.R.

“Though in my mind no torment is,
Yet, in my being’s hazard mesh
There run such streaks of cowardice
That I must dread my untrue flesh . . .”

Robert Nicholls

Publishers



since 1812

HURST AND BLACKETT LTD

LONDON NEW YORK MELBOURNE SYDNEY CAPE TOWN

With the exception of those which are household words, all the names used in this book are fictitious.

*Made and Printed in Great Britain at
The Fleet Street Press
East Harding Street, EC4*

FOR
MY MOTHER

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Author wishes to thank Mr. Milton Waldman for granting permission to print on the title page the verse from the late Mr. Robert Nicholls's poem *Invocation*, Messrs. Burns Oates & Washbourne for permission to use the late Julian Grenfell's *Into Battle*, Messrs. Sidgwick & Jackson for permission to quote some lines from Rupert Brooke's *Channel Crossing*, to Messrs. Methuen Ltd., and to the executrix of the late G. K. Chesterton's literary estate, Miss Collins, for permission to quote lines from his poem *To A Modern Poet*.

CHAPTER ONE

I

"T H A N K you, Padre, I'll take the football, and the playing-cards, and the books, but not the dartboard."

"All right, o' boy, just as you say. And—er—the *very* best of luck, you know. . . ."

I thought, I don't like the way he said that. Too much of the Poor-so-and-so-you-won't-be-alive-much-longer. I wasn't feeling too happy about the Operation anyway, and it doesn't help to have these things rubbed in, however good the intentions may be.

I lit a cigarette and got back into the jeep. We drove on up to London, past road-houses that had done well in the sale of cheap liquor and cheap music before the war, but were now jaded and derelict.

A posse of boy scouts went by dragging a handcart full of bits of iron-ware.

"That's the regiment I ought to 'ave joined," said Ilford (he's my servant). I must say I felt the same way.

We passed within a hundred yards of my house, but, of course, I couldn't stop and say "Time of day" or anything. We drove into the Horse Guards and I sent the driver and Ilford to get some lunch. We were meeting Richard and the rest of the convoy at Chelmsford and going on to the Cage from there together.

Dammit, I thought, she knows the date and the place. She knows I'm bound to be in it. I'll try and get her to have lunch with me. Can't do any harm.

So I rang up the Air Ministry and she said she couldn't, but would have a drink with me before lunch. We had a drink at Combined Ops, and it was suggested that I should go and make a third at lunch, with the Jugo-Slav. Like a fool I gave in, I wanted so badly to be in her company a little longer.

A threesome is never very comfortable in such circumstances. I didn't take to him much and he quite obviously reckoned drains to me. I left early. It wasn't even a very good lunch.

We rendezvous-ed at Chelmsford and there I arranged for the troops to have fish and chips and tea, at a wayside cafe. Then we set off again for the Cage, which was near Felixstowe.

All the vehicles had been waterproofed for wading, and were making strange chugging and grunting noises. I was riding in the scout car, whose intake had been led up through a pipe the mouth of which was just six inches from my chest. If I turned to see the rest of the convoy the flap of my leather jerkin got sucked down the intake and the scout

car stopped. It wasn't a new vehicle and soon began to stop from other causes every ten miles or so, with a plaintive cough. Never once did it stop near a pub. It wouldn't. It was that sort of scout car. I began to regard it with loathing.

It was a heart-breakingly fine evening, as though England was taunting us with a glimpse of how lovely she could be, just before our enforced departure for the other side and the unknown. The air was thick with the scent of may and hawthorn, and great banks of magnolia lined the dusty road. I had the remains of a cold, and an abcess under a tooth, but this and the frustration of my lunch-time meeting were gradually becoming of minor importance as we neared the Cage. For there, I knew, we should be cut off from human contact, with nothing to think of but the approaching Day, and nothing to do but prepare ourselves for it.

It became almost a pleasure to be cutting oneself off from normality and to be just an assault troop. I am given to learning poetry by heart, or prose, or anything which does what those things do to me, and I found myself muttering Julian Grenfell's lines, *Into Battle*.

(If you don't like poetry don't read them. It's just too bad.)

“The naked earth is warm with Spring,
And with green grass and bursting trees
Leans to the sun’s gaze, glorying,
And quivers in the sunny breeze.
And life is colour and warmth and light,
And a striving evermore for these.
And he is dead who will not fight,
And who dies fighting has increase.

The fighting man shall from the sun
Take life, and warmth from the glowing earth,
Speed with the light-foot winds to run,
And with the trees to newer birth,
And find, when fighting shall be done,
Great rest and fullness after dearth.

All the bright company of heaven
Hold him in their high comradeship,
The Dog-star, and the Sisters Seven,
Orion’s belt, and sworded hip.

The woodland trees that stand together,
They stand to him each one a friend,
They gently speak in windy weather,
They guide to valley and ridge’s end.

The kestrel hovering by day
And the little owls that call by night
Bid him be swift and keen as they,
As keen of ear, as swift of sight.

The blackbird sings to him: Brother, Brother,
If this be the last song you shall sing,
Sing well, for you may not sing another,
Brother, sing!

• . . .
And when the burning moment breaks,
And all things else are out of mind,
And only joy of battle takes
Him by the throat and makes him blind.

Through joy and blindness he shall know
—Not caring much to know—that still
Nor lead nor steel can reach him, so
That it be not the Destined Will.

The thundering line of battle stands,
And in the air death moans and sings,
But Day shall clasp him in strong hands,
And Night shall fold him in soft wings.”

If you do not like it, I repeat, don't read it. But nowhere else will you find expressed so well what I felt, in common with so many others, the anaesthesia of the time of preparation, the sharpened senses, the excitement carefully kept in the background, the anguish of leaving things and their incomparable loveliness.

* * * * *

It was dusk when we reached the Cage and it took us an hour to get the chaps bedded down and the vehicles parked properly and a guard set. Then Richard and I obtained some rather wooden steak and chips and some tea from the cookhouse. The whole thing was very much like one's first O.T.C. camp; the same smell of grass trodden down under the sun, the same toughness in the meat, the same latrines. Our camp Commandant took us in to drink beer in his mess, which was kind. I'd known him slightly at Oxford.

What the hell was the Navy doing playing at soldiers? he wondered.

Commandos, or something, he supposed. Oh, well, never mind. Have the other half.

The camp H.Q. and mess were in a peculiar house with an observatory at one end—for no very good reason—all built in the Neo-water-closet style of 1870 odd. Enter the front door and you are faced by one appalling group of statuary and flanked by another. In the grounds is one of almost every variety of tree. A ha-ha runs along parallel to the front of the house, crowned by an ornamental and entirely functionless gate. Into the ha-ha seeped the O/R's latrines.

To bed, in a little bell-tent. Last night it had been at the naval barracks, where war is almost unheard of. Some time in the next few days it would be an L.C.T. Thereafter, where?

II

Richard and I spent six days altogether in the Cage. We were later joined by Guy and Roger, but they were busy over last-minute plans in London and could not come at once. When Guy arrived he went down for two days with tonsilitis. As soon as he was up and about—though groggy—Richard had a motor-cycle accident and though he tried to struggle against a temperature of 103 until the very day we sailed, he had finally to be disembarked and sent to hospital.

This all meant that I had to do most of the donkey-work, the filling-in of bumf (not much but quite enough, just like peace-time travel to the Continent) and the indenting for missing equipment and so forth. I had also to keep an eye on the Marines we had been granted as working and fighting party. They were a poor lot, as Marines go, and the sergeant in charge of them wasn't any real use. So that there was plenty to do.

For which I was grateful. I spoke just now of the anaesthesia of preparation. It is a real quantity, as the mathematicians say. There would be an outbreak of pilfering among the men, which had to be stopped. Marine Stiggins would lose his mess tins twice daily (after meals). An hour on the rifle range would be a good idea. Listing of equipment must be done. The scout car must be turned in and a new one drawn. Weapons must be inspected, pay drawn, kit mustered. Oh, a hundred and fifty things. One had to do them. They did not take up much time or much thought, but they served to keep one from gnawing the knuckle of apprehension. One could sink oneself in them.

In the camp with us were about 3,500 other men, 7th Armoured Division, R.E., Gunners, all kinds. There was a feeling of confidence and strength there all the time, and it was as though each man communicated telepathically to his neighbour.

My God! I'm frightened. I hate this, but I wouldn't miss it for all the beer in Blighty. It's bound to go well. It's got to.

("And he shall strip his sleeve and bare his scars. And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'")

I say again. One was frightened, but one wouldn't miss it. It was going to be history.

Of 3,500 men in that camp, quite a number were veterans from Africa and Sicily and Italy. They had been rushed home for a month's leave, and then re-equipped ready for this Operation. For many of them that month's leave was the first month in England since 1940. For some it was a month of bitterness and disappointment: wives gone off with other men, children strangers to their fathers, houses destroyed by bombs. . . . To some the Mediterranean had given malaria, and now they would have recurrence of the disease. They would lie swathed in blankets, shivering and miserable. But would they go to hospital?

"No, doc, me temperature's only 104; couldn't I stay here till it drops. If I go to hospital I miss the party, see. Please, doc, have a go. . . ." No single malingerer was found among them.

(". . . And in the camp their most felicitie was hope of fight with the ennemie. . . .")

Time stood still after the first three days, as we waited for the word to embark. The weather changed. Rain came, and wind.

"If they have to postpone it more than three days because of weather, it will mean a fortnight's, a month's wait", it was said.

The order to marshal was given. We marshalled our vehicles. We returned to camp and stood listlessly around, or sat in the bar, when it was open. We talked endlessly, and somewhat hopelessly, of ourselves, and how little use we should be after the war, of the waste of our education, and of how little we could show for it. We discovered acquaintances in common and decided we didn't really like them.

The Tank chaps were a little aloof from the rest of us. They went about in corduroy trousers varying in colour from olive-green to crimson, and with coloured foulard scarves. They were the real veterans, and they knew it. We thought them a trifle blasé. They were.

Then Roger arrived at length.

"Is it still on, in spite of the weather?" I asked him.

He nodded. "It's got to be, more or less, or some bloody fool will spill it."

I thought of the woman in the Stationery Office who'd been imprisoned for telling her friends she knew what the area of operations would be. "Heavens," I said to myself, "so many people know the place. So many people. They *must* have some idea on the other side."

I mustered the troops so that Roger could speak to them.

"Good evening, all of you," he said. "It's very nice to see you all.

We're going abroad together. I can't tell you where, yet, or when, but soon. We shall go ashore on D-day, though not in the first wave. But all of you will have something to talk about, going in on D-day.

"Two Commandos are clearing the beaches, and we shall be with 50 and 51 Divisions and the 7th Armoured Division, so we're in good company. Captain Jeffries is taking his troop in a little earlier with the Canadians and with 41 and 48 Commandos, and we shall join with them later on, on D+1.

"Everyone, from Admiral Ramsey and General Montgomery downwards, is convinced that it's going to go magnificently. . . .

"Well, I won't keep you. You'll hear more later."

Roger is in some respects the most remarkable person I know. I cannot describe him accurately, but he has something truly Elizabethan about him, in the most admirable sense. When you see him, with that small beard and moustache, you think exactly that. And you are quite right.

The troops dismissed and Roger and I went back to wash. I had stripped off and was covered with lather, when a sergeant marched into the tent, and saluting smartly, asked if I was Captain K? I wasn't. What does one do when saluted in the nude? There ought to be a law against it.

The movement control officer called a meeting. It was announced over the loud hailer, and you could feel the atmosphere click into tension.

Roger and Guy and I went together, as we were all sailing on different L.C.T.

There was a good deal of paper-shuffling and some whispering. A slightly fussy little man mounted the dais.

Without paying much attention I heard him going over the movement orders.

" . . . and, gentlemen, I must impress on you that any orders I give for the marking of your vehicles must be carried out. I don't care if your colonel doesn't agree. These are orders of 21st Army Group and MUST BE CARRIED OUT. This is specially important now because. . .

. . . THE FIRST DAY OF EMBARKATION IS TO-MORROW."

Again, a heightening of the tension, a quickly taken breath here and there, and a stiffening of the back. Silence for about half a minute. Then, relaxation. No need to worry now. It's all set. No need to worry, nothing to be done, no need to worry, nothing to be done, no need. . . .

III

Someone had stayed up too late talking and smoking and drinking with his friends, someone who had to be up at four, who had a long day ahead of him, who didn't want to do what he was going to do this day.

It isn't someone else, you fool, it's you yourself. And it's four o'clock now. Come along then, wakey, wakey. Show a leg. Go and rouse the others. Party A have got to breakfast (last hot meal before embarkation, the camp commandant said) and be at their vehicles at 0530. . . .

Somehow I struggled out, and Roger's party and Guy's were wakened and got down to the vehicles. I stood with Roger, talking, while Guy's party moved off. Some soldiers were sitting in a T.C.V., fully equipped, waiting to move off, a marching party. They were looking somewhat Men 40—Horses 8. Roger said:

"Come away, I can't stand this."

The men were singing, as British soldiers invariably do, even when cheerful, a doleful little song about someone else's unsuccessful love affair.

I looked at Roger. He had gone rather pale.

A little while, and he got into the armoured car.

"I'll meet you on the Hard," he said, "and fix our rendezvous in France. I'll know by then which sector of the beach we're landing on, I hope."

I went back to the camp and had lunch with the commandant, and with Oliver, who'd also been at Oxford with me. I was growing a beard and looked a bit scruffy, but nobody seemed to mind.

It seemed that the only thing to do until the starting time at 1730 was to sleep, so I did. I woke again at 1600 and had my meal, then I packed and said good-bye to my bell-tent, which I had grown to like.

It is strange how one's mood changes. I had been thinking all afternoon, in the intervals of sleep: Good Lord, I haven't got wind-up. I'm not worrying about chances of survival. This is grand. But, once in the jeep, cruising slowly along to the start point, I felt a chilly grip at the pit of the stomach. We drove slowly on, taking three hours to do not more than ten miles. All along the route, civilians, who had been told off to keep indoors, came to their garden gates to wave us good-bye. We looked at them without interest. They belonged to one world, we to another.

And yet, how one mentally grasped out to reach at a final familiar sight, an early nineteenth century house with roses on it, magnolias by the roadside, a mother holding her children by the shoulders to keep them by her, as they watched us go past.

All along the route, too, private people brought out jugs of tea, coffee and cocoa, and home-cut sandwiches. It was damn good of them, but again, how valedictory and therefore how ever-so-slightly disagreeable. The sun came out and shone hotly on us. I felt my face beginning to burn. My black mood continued, and the wheels of the jeep rolled me and the others inexorably on.

Roger sent back a despatch rider to fetch me up to him just before he went on board. I was glad, because he had to fix a rendezvous with me, and also because he had all the rum.

He and Guy were standing on the Hard. It was just like being in a boat race crew before the start. We fixed the rendezvous, and I got some maps and a jar of rum packed up.

It didn't look as if I should see the two of them again before we landed.

"Good-bye, Roger," I said, "and for Pete's sake take care of yourself. Good-bye, Guy." It was as though our feet had brought us to the end of the world. It was awful.

I packed myself and my goods on to the pillion of the motor-cycle and bumped back to my party.

Apathetically I noted the names the chaps had painted on their vehicles, Atalanta, Fair Maid o' Perth, Grumpy, and the usual Margaret, Vicky, Babs, Mary, etc. One suitably named was Miss Carriage, a broken-down 3-ton lorry.

We passed a squadron of heavy tanks whose crews took on something of the mechanical appearance of their charges, as they marshalled them in the strong sunlight.

It was all very tense, very efficient and very urgent. (" . . . I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips, straining upon the start. . . .")

By twilight-time we were in the embarkation box. An army officer told me to get my chaps bedded down near their vehicles. There were slit trenches around in case of air raids, and many Bofors guns were manned all round us. I changed the men's money into francs. They knew, at last, which country they were going to. I wrote a last letter to her, and I remember saying in it, knowing it wouldn't be posted till long after D-day:

" . . . how nice it is to be at the pointed end of a thing like this."

But I didn't really think so.

Corporal Twigg announced suddenly:

"Mygawd, sir, I've left me tommy-gun be'ind." (All in one breath).

That's the sort of thing they were doing. Ullage, I thought, and reported it to the R.C.R.P. Half an hour later, a new tommy gun, complete with ammunition and cleaning gear was brought. The Army was like that all through. Every smallest detail was allowed for. Four years ago, the Navy used to refer to the Army with withering scorn, as these pongos; often, these flicking pongos. The term pongo, now, is one of endearment, almost of admiration.

And rightly so.

No sooner were we bedded down, than an order came to embark, after all. So we moved on to the Hard, and there embarked, with the least possible fuss. The tension had departed with the daylight. We were all on board by 0145.

Two bulldozers pushed us off and the troops began to doss down again, quite cheerfully, sleeping in the most unlikely places, on the hoods of lorries, curled up in jeeps, snuggled up on camouflage nets, lying in

scuppers—anywhere. We were in an L.C.T.III, and these have no accommodation for officers or men. There were 66 of us on board.

A sapper captain in charge of the Army party on board, issued a can of self-heating soup all round. He was, for some reason, called Egg by his intimates. It was an unsuitable name, unless eggs have spectacles and bushy black hair.

I went aft to try and find the captain of the L.C.T. It was pitch black, but I found a ladder and mounted it. My nostrils were assailed by a smell of livestock, and the ladder seemed to lead nowhere. I flashed a torch and found myself being glared at by an infuriated rabbit. I had disturbed its beauty sleep.

We had to leave the skipper alone for another half hour as the strong tide bore us on to the boom at the river mouth. Eventually, however, we got him to let us sleep on the deck in the wardroom, which three men can do without too much squash. There were four of us, two pongos and myself, and a sub R.N.V.R. We were so damn tired that it didn't matter, and we slept like logs till 0800.

We were on board for three days before we sailed. They were days of apathy and indigestion, of struggle against the dirt of an L.C.T., of fits of depression, of laying in stores of sleep. I mustered my men two or three times daily, briefed them, inspected weapons, gave them playing cards and books. They seemed quite happy. There was, fortunately, a holiday spirit throughout the whole force, and nothing that discomfort, postponement, or boredom could do was able to dispel it.

Roger rowed over in a ship's dinghy to see me. We drank some gin. He said he'd found me asleep with my mouth open, and snoring. I threw a book at him which bounced off his head and over the side.

"Your beard's coming on, little man," he said. "It's just like the hair you see on a very small mouse. What do you do to make it grow, eh?" (He pulled it. It hurt.)

"Oh, water it, stroke it, and tell it little stories," I answered. "Do you want me to examine you and see if you possess a navel? Because you're going the right way about it."

We chivied one another a bit, and then he returned to his L.C.T.

Many aircraft passed and re-passed overhead all day. They all appeared to be ours—or at least made no openly hostile move at us.

I pulled over to see Roger again just before twilight. He was looking dejected and being laboriously civil to the skipper of his L.C.T. When the skipper left us, Roger said in an exasperated way: "That young blighter ought to be ashamed of the state his ship's in. He's got no idea. Bah!"

Roger made his name in Coastal Forces, and has very strong ideas about how a ship should look. I agree generally, but how can a man take any pride in a cow of a vessel like an L.C.T.? I said: "Don't come the heavy commanding officer, Roger. Your M.G.B. wouldn't have had much chance to look tiddley if it had been inhabited half its time by

four or five dozen pongos with hobnailed boots and nowhere much to park their carcases."

We talked lazily on, avoiding reference to the fact that, all being well, we should sail on the morning tide. I was loth to leave, as, back in my own L.C.T. I was so subject to fits of lonely depression, but in the end I pulled back, and forced myself into a slightly uneasy sleep.

Morning came, a fine sunny Sunday morning, but with a brisk wind that sent little waves flinging against the ship's sides with flurries of spray. It would be rough outside.

No sailing orders came, and by 1100 it was obvious that things had been put off 24 hours. The rest of the day was rather an anti-climax, an unpleasant one. The Army kindly sent on board the Sunday papers, to keep the troops amused. They still seemed cheerful enough, and there was no tooth-sucking, which I'd have expected to hear, after so many days' inaction and discomfort.

Early next morning I was up and went up on the bridge to find the skipper opening his sealed orders. He'd had the Open Sesame signal. He passed me over a pink signal form on which was typed a laconic little message: D-day is Tuesday, June 6th. H-hour is 0725.

Just that, no more.

We sailed, and I took a last look at the gentle beauty of the banks of the Orwell at Pin Mill and Wolverstone, and nooks and crannies I used to know when sailing in peacetime. Then I told the marines off to man the L.C.T.'s Oerlikons, and made sure they had their lifebelts on.

Sixteen hours from now, I thought, the paratroops will be jumping. Twenty-four hours from now the first men will be wading ashore. I hoped that all would go as planned. Our convoy seemed very soft-skinned to be landing on D-day.

We passed an admiral's barge manned by Wrens. As each successive L.C.T. waddled by a chief yeoman of signals semaphored "Good luck," and the bunting on the bridge acknowledged.

Our L.C.T. No. 7073 was one of 70-odd petrol-driven boats ordered in a hurry in November, 1943. Most L.C.T. are Diesel-driven, but there must have been some petrol engines left over or something. The fumes from the smoke stack were unpleasant, and I don't suppose anything more unwieldy has been commissioned by Their Lordships of the Admiralty since the days of Pepys, except perhaps a floating dock.

She began to throw herself about in a half-hearted way as soon as we crossed the bar.

We assembled in two columns which stretched for miles. Before losing sight of Roger's L.C.T., I semaphored a rude message, and he replied in kind.

Force L was under way; we were in Flotilla 16, Squadron V.

Finish, I thought, as we crossed the bar, the bright day is done and we are for the dark.

CHAPTER TWO

I

By midday the L.C.T. was heaving her ungainly self about uneasily like a brontosaur with a nightmare. The Egg and his oppo didn't feel up to eating lunch, and lay in heaps in the wardroom, looking green and unsavoury. The troops on the whole were standing up to it well, with a few exceptions, notably the sapper R.S.M.

By about three p.m. we were almost out of sight of land, and nearly all the troops were sick, some, I regret to say, without having recourse to the Bags—Vomit—3 issued by an avuncular army. We were passing streams and streams of merchant ships lying at anchor waiting to move down-Channel on the succeeding days of the assault period and the build-up. One picked out names that one remembered from convoying, or that one had seen sliding up the Tagus to Lisbon.

When next we saw the coast of England we should be off Dungeness, and by then we might be under long-range shell-fire from the Gris-Nez guns.

Having nothing else to do, I went forward and warned the men of this, telling them it would only be random shelling but might be unpleasant.

I also handed out copies of a message from General Montgomery to the Assault Forces, which didn't go down badly.

Most of the men spent their whole time sleeping. Their reaction to the news that D-day was next day was: Cor, better get our heads down. May not have much chance later.

You would see them at mealtimes struggling out of their blankets, gobbling a meal, washing their mess-tins and then almost hurling themselves back into the arms of Morpheus.

* * * * *

We reached the North Foreland Buoy, just north of Deal, at 2200. Just now the paratroops would be dropping. I wished them luck. Parachuting is rather a nerve-racking business. There must be many people in the Whitehall area walking about with their fingers crossed to-night, I thought. I was feeling detached about the whole thing now, but never let myself stray far from a piece of wood to touch.

The wind freshened still more, and it looked as if the landing was going to be really foul. There was an angry sky as the light faded, and I was reminded of a somewhat fanciful picture of the Battle of Jutland

that used to hang in my grandfather's house when I was a little boy. (At least they said it was Jutland). The sky was just like that.

I warned everyone to sleep with a clasp-knife handy, in case anything happened, so that they could cut themselves clear of the camouflage net which was stretched over the tank deck.

Then I went up on the bridge and waited for the shells to come over from Gris-Nez. None came.

We were passing through the Straits at the not exactly breakneck speed of 5 knots.

At 0330 I went below to turn in. The sub-lieutenant in charge of the mobile naval radar set which was with us had elected to sleep outside, in the interests of fresh air and space.

Sleep came to us with difficulty. But it came. In addition to the two pongos and me, there was also the flotilla engineer officer, a pleasant Canadian with a snore like the open diapason of an organ.

At five o'clock the sub came into the wardroom dripping wet from the rain. We cursed him sleepily as he fitted himself into the group on the wardroom floor like the last piece of a jig-saw puzzle.

For some reason we all awoke exactly at 0725 and looked at one another.

"Did someone talk about an invasion taking place this morning?" asked the Egg.

"Don't natter," we answered.

It was hard to realise that this was Der Tag.

The wind was freshening and the old cow was waddling and ducking more and more disagreeably. So much water was coming over the bows that we couldn't get the hydro-cooker alight. The sub and I dived down into the starboard locker for some tins of self-heating cocoa to warm the shivering men. They were all pretty wet. So were we by the time we had finished.

After breakfast we took turns standing by the gun pits as extra look-outs or sat in the wardroom reading. There was an air of complete unreality, about the whole business, and the bright sun, and the cold wind and spray made me feel brittle for some reason.

I finished reading *Humphrey Clinker* which was perfect escapist literature and opened *Triple Fugue* (by a Sitwell) which was not.

As we passed Beachy Head I began to wonder if my stomach wasn't full of butterflies. Up forward, a lot of the troops were being or had been seasick, some, I found, with a whole-hearted abandon not entirely admirable.

I must try not to be sick in front of the pongos, I thought, and climbed up to the bridge to talk to the 1st lieutenant. There were miles of L.C.T. ahead and astern of us, and the large L.S.T. at the head of our convoy looked like Roman triremes in the distance.

A hoarse north-country whisper at my elbow said:

"There's a coop o' tea going in t'wardroom."

It was Ord. Signalman Bunce, who had taken me under his wing as soon as we got on board, and was always producing coops o' tea with a conspiratorial air.

Ord. Signalman Bunce was a most self-possessed child. When the war broke out he must have been $12\frac{1}{2}$. (He told me he was now $17\frac{1}{2}$, but asked me to keep it dark.) About eighteen months before this day he had intruded himself into the Navy by some means or other. Before that he had been a carpenter's apprentice. He wasn't a very good signalman, but he had a kind of solidarity and nonchalance which was wholly comforting. One felt that if we hit a mine and sank, he would appear at one's elbow in the water with a coop o' tea, and explain:

"The cooook's a friend o' mine, see."

He had no desire to return to carpentry, and was, I suppose, to date, about the 12,000th person I'd met who didn't want to go back to his normal job after the war.

"The damned ship lurched and slithered; quiet and quick
My cold gorge rose . . .
I knew I must think hard of something or be sick
And could think hard of only one thing, You. . . ."

There was a kind of ultimate despair in me, compounded of nausea and the thought that I wouldn't see her again for God knows how long, and anyway I didn't seem to mean much in her young life, though she occupied so many of my thoughts.

Much better go and be sick. Remember Dr. Johnson's advice to travellers? "Get a smart sea-sickness as soon as you can."

I did, and felt much better.

At 1300 we disobeyed all rules and regulations and switched on the B.B.C., rather in the manner of one pinching himself to make sure he is awake.

Yes, there it was, sure enough. The airborne had landed, and the first flight were doing well on the beaches. Our turn soon.

The sub was looking worried.

"What's wrong, sub?" I asked.

"My wife's expecting a baby to-day," he said, and went out of the wardroom. What could one say? I left him to his thoughts. He had something in addition to worry about. I was only concerned with my own future. I wondered if I really was more timorous by nature than other people, for I felt pretty scared, and the others seemed mostly to take it all as a matter of course. I hoped I was preserving a wooden appearance of *sang-froid*. But all through the trip there was so little for me to do that I had to make a conscious effort to put out of my mind

all thoughts of death or mutilation. In the heat of doing things no such effort is required, but the long hours of Channel crossing were like a prolonged wait before a parachute drop.

Almost feverishly I turned to thinking of all the things which had to be done before we landed, and ticked them off on my fingers:

- (1) Weapon inspection.
- (2) Make sure motors are running all right.
- (3) Stow pack away.
- (4) Ditto bedding.
- (5) Tuck map into bosom, ready for use.
- (6) See that each man's equipment and helmet were handy.
- (7) Collect rations and lash on to vehicles.
- (8) Lash rum into my jeep.

II

Just before two o'clock we turned south and were on the last leg of our journey. We were due to land in about five hours.

I shall be sorry to leave the L.C.T., I thought, though she's so uncomfortable and dirty. From now on I shall never know where I'm going to sleep until I do sleep.

If anyone had told me three days before I was going to be sorry to leave the old bitch I'd have laughed. But one adjusts oneself more or less quickly to one's surroundings, and after a space of two or three days one clings to wherever one is, presumably because each time one changes there is always the thought that the next habitation may be more uncomfortable, will probably be more dangerous, and will certainly be new.

We passed numbers of homeward-bound landing craft, L.C. (I), L.C. (T), L.C.T. (R)—all blackened from firing their rockets—and scores of other craft.

Large troop transports went proudly past, but we saw that only about half their L.C.A. were still aboard. The remainder had been left on the beaches.

A flotilla of fleet minesweepers passed three miles to starboard. Five miles to starboard something went up with a flash and left a pall of smoke. A sweeper detached herself from the flotilla and went to the rescue. We passed through several patches of oil where some poor wretches had bought it earlier on.

A monitor nosed past. There was a smug look about her, such as you'd expect to see on the face of a cat after a successful raid on the larder.

Darkness came and we reduced speed. The wind freshened still more. We were three hours late already and still ten miles from the

coast. The camouflage net was rolled back and the ramps were ready to lower.

We began to see gun flashes ahead, and from one minute to the next there would be look-out voices singing out:

“Gun flash fine on port bow, sir!”

“Gun flash bearing Green 45!”

And so forth.

I asked the skipper what he had been warned to expect in the way of opposition when we landed. He told me that several batteries would probably still be firing, mostly at random, as they were not among the first objectives.

We crept slowly up to about a mile and a half from the beach. A big fire was burning just ahead. There was an air raid in progress over the beaches, and strings of orange-red tracer climbed and wriggled slowly through the sky like chains of bright caterpillars. A deep rumble forced itself through the purr of our engines.

Then German aircraft began to throb over us. There was a flash and a thud as a ship received a direct hit about a mile away.

We all put our tin hats on, and I sent the troops below for cover. A German aircraft flew down our column and all the Oerlikons in the Force stammered noisily into action. It was a relief almost, after so much inaction.

Every now and then there would be bursts of tracer and flashes from the bigger guns of the now invisible myriads of ships lying off shore.

A signal came from our escort, delaying our beaching until first light. Weather unsuitable, said the skipper. We dropped our hook. It was cold, so I gave the chaps a tot of rum each and talked to them about nothing in particular. We were all pretty excited but very annoyed at not landing exactly on D-day. Still, the intention had been good.

At 0100 I went to the wardroom and slept in the dim red light which was all we could have on.

At four the first light came timidly from the east. It was bitterly cold, but Ord. Sig. Bunce was waving a cup of tea at me as soon as I poked my nose out of the wardroom.

There was a spasmodic air attack, and I saw a Focke-Wulf dive out of the clouds over the column a couple of cables' length to starboard. Four bombs fell, each between a pair of the vessels for which they were intended. It was like a draughts-player going one-two-three-four across the board.

The first Spitfires arrived at 0430, and an hour later we got the signal from the shore: Prepare to land.

Two cruisers sat like broody hens surrounded by drifters and landing craft. As we passed their guns spoke from time to time. I hate the noise of a cruiser's guns.

Widgeon and teal flew low over the water, looking like black tracer.

Every now and then there was a big flash and clouds of smoke and a noise as some part of the beach was cleared of mines by sappers.

We elbowed our way past many other craft. As one looked round there were so many thousands of ships that it was impossible to see the horizon and the eye became, so to speak, blasé. It was almost unimaginable, but it was true.

It was an absolute skipper's nightmare; craft going ashore, craft leaving, barges, D.U.K.W.S, rhino ferries, L.C.T., all moving like slow and independent-minded insects over the surface of a huge pool.

There was the coast; its shape and contours began to become recognisable. It was exactly as it had appeared in the low-level oblique photographs.

Over to port was La Rivière, on the port bow was Montfleury, at the top of a rise. To starboard was Le Hamel. There only seemed to be about a couple of square inches of space to manoeuvre in, and minor collisions happened from time to time. An L.C.T. let down her ramps too soon and a 3-ton lorry slid gently and irrevocably into 10 feet of water.

It was possible to see the houses on the front in more detail. They looked a little knocked about. The emptiness in their windows was the emptiness in the eyes of a blind beggar.

I took breakfast; dry biscuits and self-heated cocoa. There was no opportunity for further cooking.

We could see tanks climbing up a little hill to their transit area, just short of the top. There were a number of L.C.A. and L.C.T. lying near the beach, some with their sides torn out, some on the bottom. One petrol barge was being unloaded with ill-concealed haste.

It was 8.30 in the morning. My mother would be having breakfast. She would be on her way to Whitehall. But somehow to think of normal things was just not on. It was hard to believe that one had ever come down to bacon and eggs and coffee and opened the *Times* and leaned it against the coffee pot.

The 1st lieutenant handed us some packets of cigarettes each in an almost apologetic way. He wouldn't let us pay. I asked him to say good-bye to the skipper for us. We jumped into our vehicles. The ramps started to lower themselves. We ground on to the coast of France. We drove quietly ashore. That was all. There was no shelling, no excitement. It seemed very much of an anti-climax.

III

There were sleepless-looking men organising the unloading. A rear-admiral was wandering about in blues, looking a little out of place. The sun had come out, and he had his cap off and was mopping his brow.

Ilford had got his trousers wet as we splashed through the foot or so of water between the ramp and the dry beach.

"Why can't you drive more flickin' careful, Lofty," he said to the driver; "shakin' me off into the flickin' oggin'."

A rather low type, in blue overalls and a filthy cap, came up and grinned at us. He was one of the very few locals about. He didn't look much removed from the ape, but I may be maligning him.

There were dead men about, ours and theirs, in stiff, distorted attitudes. I tried not to notice them. I've never liked seeing people dead.

As we turned on to the coast road we were held up by a bit of a traffic jam. A dead German lay in the ditch. His face, mercifully, had been covered, but his stomach was not a nice sight.

"That's one less of the baskets," said the driver, with a mixture of unction and indifference. I couldn't quite look at it in that way for some reason.

We lurched uphill through the dust passing a few French people pushing barrows stuffed with bedding and old clothes. It looked as if Jean-Jacques was pinching what he could from Théophile, and meanwhile Théophile was swiping what he thought Jean-Jacques could do without.

At the sight of a blue hoarding saying:

DUBO
DUBON
DUBONNET

I had to suppress what nearly became a giggle. The inevitability of it.

In the middle of a minefield, surrounded with little placards decorated with a death's head and the words "Vorsicht Minen", was another placard. It was poised delicately on the edge of a crater, and read:

A Vendre
Terrains Villas
Agence Laurier

We drove into a transit area and de-waterproofed. An M.P. said we'd better look out for snipers. I put on a tin hat and grasped my automatic.

There were some fields marked as being mined, but most of them were not; battles had taken place among the nearly ripe crops, and there were dead men lying about.

We reached Crepon and turned right to Meauvaines. Some walking wounded whom we passed waved cheerfully to us. They were out of it, for a bit.

At Meauvaines, just in front of the church, I saw Roger. He was just leaving a general to whom he had been talking. (One almost expected to find him doing something of the kind).

I went up towards him on foot.

He wasn't wearing a tin hat. He seldom does, because he thinks he

looks moronic in it. But then we all look sub-human in tin hats, though not perhaps quite so desperately delta-minus as the Germans do in theirs.

"Why all this savage militarism?" he asked. "I wish you'd put that bloody cannon away. You look too wild-west for words."

This nettled me rather, so I mustered up a little severity.

"You have probably heard, Roger, that Hitler invaded Poland," I said. "Well, it's a long story, but as a more or less indirect result of that, we have arrived, uninvited, on the coast of France, where the master race are not pleased to see us. In a word, there are snipers in this area, or hadn't you heard?"

He hadn't, and I was glad to see him get into the scout car again with more haste than ceremony. We turned back towards Crepon where Roger had taken over a charming little orchard belonging to a chap called M. Le Cornu.

It was just off the main crossroads through the village, and was not a cleared area for mines or snipers, but the high stone wall round it would make it difficult for the latter, and there were cattle wandering about in it which suggested the absence of mines. The front line by this time was 4 or 5 miles south of us, and from time to time German guns were hurling shells over our heads towards the beaches, though this was very intermittent.

We were pretty tired and treated the danger of bombing or shelling in a very cavalier manner, putting up camp beds under the gnarled apple trees, and making only the smallest enlargement of a ditch to act as a slit-trench.

There was a great peace in this orchard, and it was a treat to be able to stretch oneself, to have space to put one's gear, to leave behind the uneasy motion of the L.C.T., the slipperiness of army boots on the steel deck, the smell of stale cocoa and petrol vapour and vomit, and the impossibility of keeping clean. Here was fresh firm grass underfoot, and an old grey sleepy house, and warm sunlight filtering through apple branches; and here, too, was a little, inefficient well, with a broken chain and a leaky bucket, in whose cool water we washed ourselves.

We opened 24-hour packs and munched chocolate and biscuits, and brewed tea.

Then Guy turned up. His battledress was wet and there was oil on it, and oil on his hands and face. His cap-badge had shifted round until it was almost over his left ear. But there was a glint of triumph behind his spectacles. He had brought the wireless truck ashore, building about 100 yards of road to bear it, and that, oddly enough, is the kind of thing that he enjoys doing, above all.

Guy has two kinds of glint in the eye. One is a glint of battle, the other of triumph. Face him with the problem of getting two torpedoes on to a truck, with only one man and a boy and a toothbrush to do it

with, and he will spend many a contented hour, with this same glint of battle in his eye. He will get the torpedoes there and will reappear perspiring, with his hair on end, and grease all over him, and bleeding from about fifteen different abrasions, but radiant with happiness; and there will be the glint of triumph.

He is simple in the best sense of the word, without personal ambition, industrious, of great kindness, and at times very funny, either consciously or unconsciously. I find him quite enchanting. So does everyone else.

We went to look at the local manor, which had been a minor Luftwaffe H.Q. It had been left in a hurry after a scuffle. There was a mixture of blood and carrots and potato peel on the kitchen floor, and a corpse lay in the garden. Across the back door was the dead body of a huge Alsatian bitch. There were abandoned rifles and helmets and uniforms everywhere, photos of German mädelns and pin-up girls, loaves of bread and sauerbrot, empty bottles.

There was, too, a rather smart little bar with a grand piano in it, on which a great deal of money must have been spent. A proclamation over the mantelpiece stated that the bar had been opened on 4th June, 1944. (Every picture tells a story).

Over the whole rather charming little house hung a kind of macabre foulness, a smell not only of blood and bad drains, but less obviously recognisable. It is a sort of dingy-brown, Irish-stew smell which you find wherever Germans have lived.

Said Roger: "You're imagining things. It's just the soap they use and the cigars they smoke."

It is more than that. It is an aura that only the German leaves in a place he has inhabited, and I hate it.

Roger was taken sick when we got back to the orchard, and we were all pretty tired, so we turned in, in broad daylight. I set a guard and arranged to be called every two hours to inspect it.

Until dark I lay smoking and thinking.

It was in a way, the beginning, in a way the end. We were here, but we hadn't started our job. That would do to-morrow. For months, even years, people by the thousand had toiled and digested and argued and quarrelled, and then agreed over the broad sweep of it and over the details. Some of those people were taking part in it, seeing the sombre magnificence of their plan, a magnificence echoed by its resonant code-name. Others were doomed to sit in Whitehall or at battle headquarters in England, hoping and wondering.

For many years, perhaps for centuries, it would be the model operation of its kind, a sort of copybook exercise.

So far it had gone brilliantly well, though no doubt there had been many slips-up in the drill. We weren't out of the wood, nor should we be for three days at least, but we were ashore and so were many thousands

of others, enough, we thought, to hold the bridgehead till more should come.

"History," said one of our best historians, "is lived forward, but written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning, and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only."

So far in this operation, I had lived through the beginning and the limbo before the beginning; I had tried and was trying and would continue to try to detach a part of my conscious self to observe and report on what the rest of me, and as far as possible the others with me were feeling, as we lived and worked and fought. This I would try to do in action, and even up to the point of dying. It was worth while trying.

But I fear that the historian's view is the right one, except for those who, like Pepys, are great diarists.

CHAPTER THREE

I

At six in the morning there was a loud clattering about half a mile away as though a Gargantuan cat with fireworks tied to its tail was running down the road. I woke up, and, looking into the sky, saw two Focke-Wulfs streaking away to the south. They had been shooting up some of our tanks. During the night, the guard said, there had been desultory shelling of the crossroads three-quarters of a mile away, but it didn't bother us. The only thing that shook us a little was to see four dejected German soldiers being led away from Crepon. They were snipers who had been prised out of the church tower during the night. We *had* rather asked for it. As a result of seeing this our servants refused to let us out of their sight and even when we went to answer nature's peremptory summons, a marine armed with a tommy-gun stood over us. (I hate using coy circumlocution of this kind, but you know what people are.)

I lay wide awake in bed for half an hour listening to thrushes and cuckoos and other birds of species I didn't know.

Roger was still sick, so Guy and I left him well covered up and went to Arromanches to do our first day's work. There was no one much there besides ourselves, but an elderly R.N. commander came up to us and asked if we could help him to find a house with two bathrooms at least, for the N.O.I.C. designate to occupy. We asked him if he knew how the battle was going. He didn't know, nor did he seem, moreover, to be at all convinced that anything serious ever happens on land. (Good old Navy, I thought.)

Guy and I entered a strongpoint, walking delicately, because of mines. We kept an interval of 20 yards. The commander followed us. He was very annoyed when we brought down a ceiling while blowing up a safe. We waved him away and he went out tut-tutting to find someone who would be able to get rid of us.

Later on in the morning, Guy was up at the top of a kind of wireless tower. He was balanced precariously on his C. of G.; both hands were full of spanners and a screwdriver was between his teeth.

Suddenly there was a sound of firing and a bullet or two went past, not close, but roughly in our direction.

"Guy," I shouted, "are you happy in your work?"

"Ugh." (A screwdriver dropped). "Yes, blast, why?"

"Someone doesn't like us and is firing this way. You'd better come down until they stop."

He couldn't extricate himself so I had to go and tug him out of the lattice work. We sucked some sweets and shooed away some Frenchmen, and looked over the cliffs to where work was just beginning on the "Mulberry" or artificial port of Arromanches.

A line of old merchant ships had been sunk as outer breakwater. There were no "Phoenixes" (concrete barges) yet, but there was a lot of other shipping there.

The firing stopped and we finished our job and returned to Crepon. More biscuits and an unsavoury stew of powdered meat and hot water and oatmeal.

Then we set forth towards Douvres, where we would meet Bill Jeffries and his troop, and Sam who had landed with them.

We said good-bye to the orchard of M. Le Cornu with regret. Next time I saw it, great roads had been cut round it, and it had a sophisticated, town-dwelling look. Later still, the French were gathering in the harvest from the fields round about, and there were grain-stooks standing where, before, the dead men lay.

II

The day grew steadily more disagreeable. There was wind and a smudgy indeterminate shower of rain as we drove into Tailleville.

This little place had been fought through by the North Shore Regiment the evening before and that morning. It was here that the Canadians first came across a not uncommon German ruse. From the grounds of the German headquarters a white flag was raised—the usual token of surrender, but when the Canadians, slowly advancing to receive the surrender, emerged from cover, the Germans opened fire. After that no prisoners were taken at Tailleville H.Q.

The situation was a little confused as there were pockets of Germans resisting still some miles behind our line, and the line was not static, but oscillated to and fro like a violin string.

One of the largest pockets was in a strongpoint at Douvres—la Délivrande, which had been the objective of Bill Jeffries and Sam. Here were about 200 Germans comfortably ensconced in a large underground complex about a quarter of a square mile in area, surrounded by belts of mine fields. They had plenty of food, many cunningly concealed fire points and observation posts, and were, in fact, sitting pretty, but for the fact that they were not believed to have any guns larger than 2-cm. flak.

It was astonishing that the existence of this underground complex was not known until it was reached, for practically every Frenchman in the neighbourhood had had to work on the construction, which was by now over a year old. It seemed lamentable that the intelligence

queens either did not know of its existence or did not tell the Army. For the Army it was a surprise packet, as was the existence of large numbers of deep communication trenches, dug under hedges, criss-cross through this part of the country, along which whole divisions could have moved unobserved, even from the air.

Guy and I paused in Tailleville, while Roger went on to make contact with Bill Jeffries. We secreted ourselves in a side-street, and left the marines to guard the vehicles, while we looked at the headquarters. One interesting little thing I removed was a telephone message from an O.P. at the coast.

It read:

“0745: Enemy craft in large numbers approaching shore. Wind moderately high, waves 4-5 feet. Some of these craft have been hit by our guns but the others are coming on.

0805: In spite of heavy fire, the enemy has succeeded in getting men ashore. They lie on the beaches a little while but get up soon and charge towards the strongpoints with bayonets.

0820: More and more enemy craft, without number. There does not seem to be any way to stop them. Our defences are being swamped. Soon I must leave this post if I wish to bring a proper report to you.

0825: The nearest enemy troops are 300 yards away. I shall of course resist but you will understand that they are now superior to us in numbers. Where are our support troops?

0830: Feldwebel — has just been hit by a grenade splinter. The enemy are closer still now. . . .”

And there it stopped. As I read it I felt as if I had stepped through the looking glass. I could see the wild-eyed man on the coast, and I could imagine his opposite number at the little headquarters putting down his razor and picking up the telephone, his face still half-lathered; and I could sense the growing panic and gradual realisation of what it all meant. . . .

When Guy and I returned the marines were digging their mugs into a great bucket full of milk which a kindly country woman had brought for them. The people here were better pleased to see us than elsewhere in Normandy, where at best they were uninterested, at worst cool.

The natives, as I say, appeared to be friendly there, so we decided to spend the night. Guy and I found a portion of German communication trench, with cornfields on each side of it and a thick hedge over it. From it we ejected some soldiers and started to peg out our own claim. The trench began at the wall just outside the H.Q. and wormed its way across the countryside. Our portion was bounded by a road at one end and a German anti-tank gun emplacement (abandoned) at the other. The drizzle continued and we laid trusses of straw at the bottom of the

trench to soften the places where we intended to sleep, and spread groundsheets over the top of the trench to keep most of the rain out.

Roger arrived back from Bill Jeffries' troop and told me to get ready to take them up some self-heating soup as they were short of this.

"Really," he said, "The Black Watch are intolerable. They're so damn conceited, and they've been treating poor old Bill like dirt. I was glad to see that when mortars and shells started coming over, however, they got into the ditch like any normal people."

Tailleville was to be our home for three days and nights so I describe it in brief. The village is a dim, grey little place full of broken windows, with a damaged water tower and the local manor as its only major edifices. It was raining, off and on, most of the time, and one could take one's choice between being a troglodyte and getting the earth from the trench walls in one's food and hair, or sitting in a machine-gun emplacement slightly protected by a hedge but subject to occasional sniping, particularly at first and last light, and also to a chilly shower if one shook the hedge. There were quite a number of snipers in the area, some in uniform, others dressed as peasants but probably German, and a few women.

It wasn't a very cheerful place, and we felt that the ironical thing about it was that the Germans wouldn't have dreamed of sleeping in the trench. We were glad of it, as at night, German aircraft dropped anti-personnel bombs, and there was generally a certain amount of mortaring and shellfire, particularly the first night when the Germans counter-attacked to within a mile and a half. In fact it was probably the quietest and safest place we had to sleep in during the first fortnight, but that first night, it seemed, in the rain and under grey skies, a very poor substitute for our orchard.

We were all tired and a little uncertain of the situation. Bad weather was holding up landing of men and stores, and we were slightly worried about whether the bridgehead would be held. For no reason in particular the fact that Bill Jeffries and Sam and the troop arrived back at our H.Q. just as I was about to start up to the line to take them the self-heating soup, depressed me as well. My uncertainty about the whole business was enhanced.

We got his chaps fed and bedded down and then I sat Bill down and made him talk, as he looked as if he had something to get off his chest.

When he arrived, all six-foot-three of him, looming up out of the fog of war, and looking like a reluctant gangster, he was closely followed by a minute mongrel puppy about seven or eight weeks old. It was so small and so near the ground that its undercarriage caught on any major stone and it fell over. But it was a cheerful little beast and adopted the signal truck at once. It was named Sparks and rated Dog Second Class.

While he talked, Bill fondled it.

"I was a spot worried," he said, for a long time before the day, not

about the way the troops would react—because most of them have been in action before—but about how I'd react, and if I'd let the side down. I think the worst thing was hearing the chaps on board the L.S. (I) say: Good-bye and good luck, as they lowered us away in the assault craft. It seemed hellishly final, and I felt bloody. A lot of us were sick, and even the skipper of the assault craft wasn't looking too happy. We had seven or eight miles to go and were due to follow 48 Commando in. There was a hell of a lot of noise going on, and I expected we'd get hit any moment, especially as 48 Commando were a minute or two late and we had to stooge-around for a little off shore till they got there. Then I saw one of their L.C.A. get a direct hit and a lot of wounded chaps floundering and trying to swim. And there were a lot of people from 41 Commando, just a little way away being hit as they went down the ramps, and slithering off to struggle and drown in the shallow water.

"Our little skipper did us damn well, gave us a perfect landing, and we all got ashore without a scratch. We got under a concrete parapet at the top of the beach and lay down to get our breath. Still no one damaged or killed. While we were there I saw the C.O. of 41 Commando going round and sorting his chaps out. A lot of their officers had been killed and there he was, in person, going round, standing up, mind you, and telling each section, even each man, where to go and what to do. By a miracle he got away with it. . . .

"I reckon he deserves a gong for that.

"And by God, the North Shores. Y'know, the R.A.F. and the Navy between them had only knocked chips off the outsides of the concrete emplacements and strongpoints. The Germans inside were all right. I saw Major Dawnay take his chaps up towards a strongpoint and get ready to assault it. Fortunately the Germans came out and surrendered. I suppose they'd been softened up by the bombardment even though the pillbox was intact.

"Well, that's about all. . . . We pushed on as far as here, and there was a spot of bother, so we dossed down and waited till morning and then we assisted in taking the place. You should have seen Sam arresting his seven prisoners. They turned out to be Italians and fell on his neck and wept."

We turned in and slept pretty well, except that there was a lot of noise and the rain kept trickling down the trench walls.

III

We trotted dutifully round all the next morning visiting various corps H.Q. At Canadian III Div. H.Q. we were able to see the position as a whole, and I was glad to find that it was much brighter than I had gloomily surmised the evening before.

The Canadians, we learned, were beating off on an average a counter-attack by infantry every three hours; they were expecting an armoured counter-attack shortly, but would beat it off. Most of their forward regiments were pretty exhausted and had suffered heavy casualties, but the North Shores were in good heart and the La Chaudière, whom I saw, were marching cheerfully up towards the line again singing at the tops of their voices their marching song, which goes to the tune of "Sambre-Meuse":

"LE REGIMENT DE LA CHAUDIÈRE. . . ."

We now had a respectable bridgehead about 38 km. long and, in places, 18 km. deep. Caen was being hotly contested, but Bayeux had fallen undamaged and without a fight. The Caen-Ouistreham Canal was only partly ours, and things were very sticky east of Ouistreham, where the airborne were sitting. South of us were the 21st Panzers, the 12th S.S. Panzers and the Panzer Lehr (who had suddenly and unexpectedly appeared in the field as a fighting unit); and eight other armoured divisions were said to be moving up towards us.

The Americans at the Omaha sector were not, we gathered, doing so well. After the amount of line shot by Americans about how good they were, we were all a little pleased to hear this. It would larn 'em, we felt, not to talk so much. (This is what the Germans call *Schadenfreude*, a mean and unpleasant sensation, but very satisfying. I noted during the operations in France, however, that if ever I had *Schadenfreudig* tendencies, I always had to take back what I said and/or thought sooner or later.)

At XXX Corps we stopped for lunch. It was at that time a mile and a half or so from the coast, and battleships were firing at the enemy right over our heads making us jump a good deal. Here, too, I heard an elderly colonel discussing what one of his juniors was doing.

"Oh, rather," he said, "young Smith is up near——with the——shires. He's got a powerful lot of Hun tanks facing him, and he and his anti-tank guns must be having the time o' their lives, yes, the time o' their lives."

Thereafter, the phrase "time o' their lives" seemed to me to define exactly what H.Q. officers imagine the chaps in the line are thinking when things are particularly sticky. Time o' their lives, indeed.

To improve liaison with the Pongos, we again visited the Black Watch, making sure that we and the marines were looking pretty smart; the Black Watch are a tiddley crowd, and one has to conform. They informed us that they were being relieved by the Camerons. We sighed with relief. That meant we could go up and see the forward troops, dressed for comfort. That, of course, was just the sort of thing we were saying among ourselves. I mean no disrespect.

Finally, to make a day of it, we went and examined Ouistreham,

which was on the eastern edge of the bridgehead. It was a desolate little place, rather badly shattered by us or by the Germans or both. We went on board a tug and looked for demolition charges with D.A. fuses or clocks, and then searched for mines. There was sniping from the other side of the Canal. And then I began to feel unwell—perhaps from too much condensed and very rich food. So I retired to a quiet corner to heave it up. Just at that moment, mortar bombs started whistling over and landing in amongst us. Now I haven't the spiritual detachment needed to be quietly sick while people throw mortar bombs at me. So I had, perforce, to contain myself and dive into a German dug-out, where an uncomfortable twenty minutes was spent until the mortaring stopped.

We came out for a breath of air, and immediately the only considerable force of aircraft I ever saw from the German lines came over and attacked the battleships which were bombarding the Germans on the other side of the river. Just for fun they dropped a couple of eggs near us. The fleet opened up, and the bombers were eventually seen off by R.A.F. fighters. It was a gay little afternoon, but I still didn't feel up to enjoying the show, and our drive back was fraught with anxiety lest I shouldn't be able to leave the jeep in time to get rid of what I had to get rid of. It wasn't very pleasant.

To crown it all, we found on our return to Tailleville that one of the N.C.O.s had either been at the rum or had found some independent source of supply of strong drink. He was wandering round the camp looking vaguely Russian, and muttering every now and then: "San Fairy Ann" which we took to be basic French for *ça ne fait rien*. As he advanced towards us, slightly unsteadily, Roger whispered to me: "*Wie ist der Oberfeldwebel so besoffen geworden?*" I didn't know, but I had him on the mat. Roger had him on the mat next morning, too, when his morale was at its lowest ebb, and operation overhang was in progress; and I think he regretted it. He had to remain a sergeant for the present, but we were decided that he was to be removed as soon as possible.

Thenceforward we referred to him as *Der Besoffener Feldwebel*, which sounded rather like the title of a Strauss operetta.

As a result of our visit to XXX Corps we were able to arrange a supply of compo rations and were therefore no longer confined to the 24-hour pack. The relief was considerable. Compo isn't bad considering what it might have been. With rather typical arithmetic, the Army worked out a ration which would either feed one man for fourteen days or fourteen men for one day. All I can say is that I hope I'm never in the position of being the One Man. Nor do I think it clever that they should have designed as a standby pudding ("afters" the men call it) a mixed fruit horror that takes one hour and twenty minutes to cook. It may be all right if you are marching on your stomach and have

time (a) to cook it, and (b) to sleep it off. But for a mobile party it is useless.

Before last light I inspected the camp lines, having recovered from my stomachic upset, and found the usual mess that Englishmen leave in any rural part. The English soldier has to be kicked around a hell of a lot to make him tidy, and I felt that we should be leaving a bad impression with the French if we strewed disorder about where the Germans had left nothing but order. So I had to organise a blitz, and I found it quite difficult to discourage the equivalent of the charlady's "sweep it under the carpet, ducky" from taking place.

None of this improved my temper which was a little raw from lack of sleep and fatigue in general. It began to rain again as I turned in. . . .

If I have described this day in some detail it is because it was typical of most of our days. They were always long and pretty tiring. There was generally a visit to some sort of army headquarters, followed by a trip towards the fighting area. There was nearly always some difficulty engineered either wilfully or unconsciously by the marines, and there was always a good deal of noise. As a rule, too, it was raining during these first days at some time or other. And we all found our tempers a little super-sensitive at intervals, however angelic they might be in more normal circumstances.

CHAPTER FOUR

NEXT day it was decided that Guy should return to England with what we had picked up at Arromanches as there was no other way of sending it home. I envied him, and wondered what it would be like to find oneself in England again. It seemed so far away, I also wondered what the newspapers were saying and whether London was—as they say—agog still. We all gave him messages to our parents and girlfriends and wives, and I spent the whole of a morning trying to arrange to get him out to the *Hilary*, a naval H.Q. ship from which the despatch boats left. The wettest thing in Staff Officers I have ever met informed us that despatch boats only took despatches and important Press material.

Guy immediately assumed the kind of look that Lady Bracknell put on when she heard that John Worthing was found at Victoria Station in a handbag, and said "PRESS MATERIAL!!" And the little chap wilted and fixed everything up.

Guy left, and I watched him go, thinking it would be nice to be among the first to get back.

Roger and I then drove off to Bayeux, which had been taken a day or so before. We stopped the vehicles outside the cathedral, which is a lovely thing. We stood and looked at it and thought about the reverse operation of 1066, in celebration of which William of Normandy built this edifice to the glory of God. There were the twin towers and spires with their noble Norman simplicity, and the later double-flying-buttresses along the nave. There was peace in the place and peace throughout the old town. We shook off a pest of a small boy who hadn't seen any Englishmen before, but was obviously out for gain. He was offering to take us up the tower (ver' high!) or down to the crypt (ver' low!).

We left and drove to Port-en-Bessin. The place was somewhat disorientated as it had been the scene of a scuffle, and the Germans had done some demolition. A crane with a long giraffe-like neck had been left alongside a wall. The upper portion where the pulley wheels lived was buried in a rose bush so that it looked like a Walt Disney dinosaur, in a bit of a tantrum, eating roses.

On the way to the port we passed Montgomery. He was going one way in a jeep surrounded with other traffic, and we the other. It so happened that, expecting us to see him and salute, he was quicker on the draw than we were. So that his hand was up (—2 —3) down before ours.

By the time we reached Port-en-Bessin (and this will show you the fine Celtic sweep of Roger's imagination) the story had developed. Montgomery had stopped his jeep, waved to us to stop, come across, saluted smartly, shaken Roger by the hand and thanked him (the Navy) on behalf of the Army, for the wonderful performance put up by the Navy.

With keeping, the story improved still more, like a good Burgundy. Which all goes to show that only about a tenth of what Roger says is true.

Roger went to talk to some official while I went on board a German flakship. There was a safe on board in the captain's cabin. Though I only used about a quarter of a pound of H.E. to blow it open, the thing went off with a hell of a crack and bits flew all over the little harbour. So I assume that it must have been booby-trapped. If so, how lucky one didn't try to open it with a crowbar.

Roger was angry. So was a marine colonel who happened to be on board.

We left the fussy little port and went on to Pointe de la Percée. Treading very gingerly, we entered a strongpoint. None of us went off bang so we were fortunate. For the first time for about four days we slept under cover in a German dug-out. There was no alcohol, but we found about twenty crates of Vichy water, which is at any rate good for the digestion. As there was no other fresh water to be had we shaved in it in the morning. It gave a very good lather when hot but it frothed a little on the face flannel.

An attempt by the Americans to share our billet was foiled by our showing them a quite harmless demolition charge with its detonator still in. They didn't fancy sleeping near it.

Next morning as we left, a weary-looking platoon of American infantrymen passed us.

"Hey!!" shouted the officer in charge. "Where are we?"

"I object to being addressed as *hey*," said Roger, going all Old Etonian.

"O.K. have it your own way, but where are we?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Roger.

In the interests of Anglo-American concord I intervened and told the little man where he was.

By the time we caught up with the rest of the party they had moved to a little chateau near Douvres la Délivrande, about a quarter of a mile from the strongpoint where 200 Germans were still living.

The chateau was built about 1910 and had a raffish Edwardian air about it. It also had a finely kept vegetable garden; and the village of La Délivrande boasts a satisfying Norman church.

On the wall of our ante-room was a little notice saying *Was würde der Führer dazu sagen?* It amused me to wonder what the Führer was actually saying at the moment.

The chateau belonged to M. Collin, an industrialist, who had the misfortune to be living in Caen when we landed and hadn't been able to get out. Caen was at that time being pounded rather heavily with guns and whatnot. Roger and I went to drink cider in the local inn, but we couldn't be either contemplative or jolly and unbuttoned, because

a battery of 7.2 howitzers about 300 yards away kept us jumping as they went off.

It was a disadvantage of this chateau that it was ringed with howitzers, and that there were about twelve Bofors guns and two batteries of 3.7 A.A. guns apparently sited in the next door garden. Each night the Germans would either raid us, which meant a lot of bombs dropping all around, or try to drop supplies to their friends in the strongpoint. In either event the A.A. guns would open up and it meant one couldn't get much sleep between sundown and sunrise. Nor could one get much before or after dark, because that was when the howitzers would be firing. Altogether it was very noisy. And each morning a small battle took place for possession of the supplies dropped by parachute on or near the strongpoint, between the rightful owners and ourselves, who were, of course, mere interlopers.

There was also a certain amount of sniping, and the commanding officer of the German party was continually being reported as entering the village on a bicycle, dressed as a peasant. There were also reports of cows and women entering the strongpoint after dark.

So it was altogether rather what some would call a do.

On the whole, however, there seemed to be a kind of gentleman's agreement between ourselves and the Germans there. They didn't fire at us as long as we left them alone; and vice-versa. But on two occasions the marines were taken out to go and shoot off small arms in the right direction, and one of us naval officers went along to ensure fair play. Thereafter, the Germans would come out in the twilight and snipe just to pay us back.

Roger went back to England fairly soon, but I stayed in the place for about four days. My strongest recollections were (a) of a lot of banging, and (b) of the sight of Sam, bare to the waist, opening a bottle of Vichy water in the light of flares and gun flashes. The latter impression will always be with me.

The *Times* of June 7th arrived and we learned that the invasion had begun. We spent our time in mopping-up operations. I went back to glean the remainder of things at Arromanches and saw the great artificial port shaping itself gradually but surely. Not for the first time I had cause to lament the inadequacy of Ilford. I told him we should want rations for 36 hours, he only brought them for 12; so we were obliged to live on some German canned food left by the garrison.

The aged commander whom Guy and I had met before, came to see what I was up to and said with a cold glare, "What, *you* again?" Unfortunately I was blowing down another wall when he arrived. He again left me, muttering viciously.

Meantime, when I returned to Douvres, I found that officers of ever-increasing seniority had been coming to inspect the situation, and saying

that it was a dam' bad show that these fellas were still ensconced and time something was done about it. It had now reached the major-general level, and an attack with flails and tanks was laid on by 41 Commando for the following day.

Two signals arrived, one telling me that I was to report to Guy on board the *Hilary* next morning—so that I shouldn't be able to take part in the attack on Douvres; and the other stating that the western party had been unable to land until D plus 5, and that they had been attacked with A/P bombs that night, a number of casualties being caused.

Among the casualties was Jock Burns, who was killed. I felt rather low about this, for he and I had parted on not very good terms and the fault had been mine. It was all the more unpleasant because one would never be able to do anything about it now. I also found myself thanking my stars that a change of plans had sent me with Roger for what was supposed to be the tougher landing. Originally I had been supposed to land with the western party, in which case I might not now be among those present.

The C.O. of the marines came over to see us and seemed to be rather jumpy, which was understandable in the circumstances.

After a very noisy night I pushed off to Juno beach and had a struggle to get out to *Hilary*. There was at this time no regular service from the beach to the H.Q. ships, or if there was, no one knew when it left, or whence, so that one was forced to use any mode of conveyance one could grab.

This time I started off in a converted Thames lighter (known as an L.B. (V) or Landing Barge (Victuals). It was served by three soldiers in a rather nonchalant way and they agreed to get me out to the H.Q. of the ferry service, whence I might or might not obtain transport to *Hilary*.

An American launch came nearly alongside, so I hailed them and transferred myself and Ilford and baggage. They couldn't take me all the way but transferred me to a launch belonging to the Naval Control Boarding Officers. After visiting what seemed like about a third of the Merchant Navy, we came alongside the *Hilary* and scrambled up. The trip of one and half miles had taken two and a half hours but it meant that I wasn't too early for breakfast on board.

It was almost a surprise to eat bread again after three weeks, and to put milk and sugar into tea. For you should know that Army rations supply an off-white powder, said to be tea, sugar and milk in one. You put it into boiling water in a mess tin and it froths over the side. Having burned your hands getting the mess tin off the fire, you proceed to scrape off the scum from the top, removing any twigs or bits of string which have found their way there, and you are left with a grey-brown fluid which is just drinkable, but which is about two-thirds tea-leaf—unless of course you've got a spare handkerchief to strain it through.

As I say it was a surprise, it was civilisation.

Guy came up into the wardroom glinting with triumph again.

"I say, Peter, they're awfully pleased with our Arromanches job, you know. Only thing is, I kept on telling them you were there, but they seemed to think I'd done it all." He was genuinely worried about this.

"Don't worry, Guy. You were the chap in charge."

(All the same I thought, I do like getting *some* credit for things. With a struggle I pushed it out of my mind.)

"The admiral even had the nerve to say he wished he'd been young enough to be with us when we were doing it."

"Bah!" I said, "Sort of thing the old coot would say. He knows that we know that he knows he'd much rather be sitting on his fanny in London."

"Don't know about that. They've started firing V.I.'s at London. Doing some damage, too. They're rather disturbing."

"Are they, by God? Anyway, what am I here for now?"

"We're going to render some things safe over on Utah beach, and you're going to take them home."

"Oh!" (I had been half hoping for this.)

About seven changes of boat took us across to the American sector. The King was visiting the assault area, and everyone official was in a hell of a state, so our requests for boats were met with a stony "awfully sorry, o' boy."

However, by ringing changes between an M.L., a U.S. patrol boat and sundry air-sea rescue craft we managed to get across the odd 20 miles in a record time of about eight hours.

On the way I slipped while changing boats and my foot was crushed between an M.L. and the rubbing-strake of the *Royal Ulsterman*. It was a bit difficult to walk on it for two or three days.

We were accompanied across by two American pongos who had spent the previous night being sick in the despatch boat and didn't seem disposed to stop being sick now. We got them some tea but they couldn't look at it.

"Brother, I wonder right now what you use these liquids for?"

Poor chaps. They couldn't even keep an aspirin down, and by the time we got to the Omaha sector, they were so weak from nausea that bowlines had to be put under their armpits to help them up the scrambling nets which hung from the side of the U.S.S. *Ancon*.

The *Ancon* was fitted up by the U.S. Navy as a headquarters ship for amphibious operations. She had taken part in the North African, the Sicilian and the Salerno landings. In peacetime she'd been a luxury liner, and in spite of her alterations, to us, coming from a rather sordid soldier's existence, she didn't seem less than miraculous in her comfort.

Coffee was almost a new sensation. So was eating a four-course dinner off plates and with more than one knife, fork and spoon.

We pushed on to the U.S.S. *Bayfield*, yet another H.Q. ship lying off the Utah beaches.

Unfortunately I find the greatest difficulty in distinguishing between one American face and another. It's just like the Chinese. And I suffered the great embarrassment of greeting a chap like a long-lost brother only to find that he was a perfect stranger.

The S.O. (I) took us under his wing and found us somewhere to sleep. It was all I really cared about.

"I can't promise you a quiet night," he said. "The Heinies generally lay on a honey of a raid about midnight and we all let 'em have it."

It didn't matter, we told him. It didn't really. Comfort was the main thing. I went and soaked out three weeks' dirt in a hot shower, taking half an hour over it. How anyone who can have a hot shower or a hot bath whenever he likes ever brings himself not to do so is a mystery to me. It's flying in the face of nature not to recognise and make use of the blessing of hot water.

Relaxed and clean, I went up to talk to the S.O. (I). Like many of his countrymen, he was a little long-winded. They are, nearly all of them. One expects slickness, a swift recognition of the point at issue. One finds, except in rare cases, a verbosity and redundancy in conversation and in any dealings, which at first annoys, then brings out what latent patience one has, and finally passes unnoticed. In only a few cases are they as economical in words and time as we are.

I left him and turned in, leaving Guy to breast the flood of verbiage.

At midnight the raid started. Flares were dropped and there was a hum of aircraft, and the heavy *ack-ack* began to thud away overhead, and the quick-firing stuff began to natter. Somehow the noise was like an opiate, and I was asleep long before Guy came back to our cabin.

In that half state of consciousness before sleep an imaginary trace of Worth's *Je reviens* seemed to dust my nostrils. It's funny how a particular perfume should characterise a person. At that fragmentary whiff of imagination I could almost feel her with me, and my blood started to tingle.

For three weeks or so I had had so much to think of merely in finding places to live in, places to draw food and water and petrol, in searching, in avoiding snipers and snatching sleep that it was only in occasional moments that I'd had time to think of her, and then it was necessary to check myself.

But living in relative luxury on board, relaxing in the splendour of a hot shower and sleeping between sheets, my mind turned at once to snatch at the things I associated with her. Nor was there any need to screw myself away from such thoughts of the unattainable. Perhaps the day after to-morrow, I told myself, you will see her.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

THE Utah beaches are backed by a set of gentle dunes and beyond that by land which is nearly below sea-level. The Germans had flooded this low-lying country as an anti-invasion measure.

We went ashore accompanied by a U.S. lieutenant and began our first day's labour with the Americans.

After one's initial surprise at their slowness in conversation one's next impression is of gratified amazement at the amount of trouble they will take for you. It wasn't that they particularly liked us, or anything, but if they felt there was a job to be done either for us or with us, they would go to any length to do it. It embarrassed me a little. I thanked them for all they were doing, probably rather over-profoundly. They became embarrassed in turn at my thanks and didn't know what quite to say in reply. I had to become accustomed to being addressed as lootenant. They never call one by one's name.

The job was finished and Guy left to join the western party. I waited at the Beachmaster's command post until an L.S.T. should beach and I could go on board.

A captain of the U.S. Army Engineers suggested a run inland in a jeep to get away from the goddam salt-sea air. We trekked round a bit but it wasn't very pleasant. I'd cleaned the dust out of my hair and ears the night before but it began to accumulate again as we passed long convoys on the narrow roads. One of these convoys consisted of truckloads of German prisoners. Most of them were very young and they wore the puzzled and slightly sharne-faced look you see in a beaten football team.

An 88-millimetre gun up the coast was shelling the beach area when we got back. It was not very thorough and was firing at almost extreme range, but being shelled is nasty.

"Come and have chow with us," said the captain.

I followed him back to his billet and we passed on our way a bunch of negro soldiers loading trucks.

"That's the worst mistake the Army ever made," said the captain, "bringing in them goddam darkies."

It seemed a strange remark to come from the home of democracy; all men it appears are by no means created equal.

But I felt all the time that I shouldn't criticise his attitude until I could see what his fellow white Americans thought or what impression the darkies made on me. That would only be possible after I'd seen more

of both sides on their own ground. Still, I was hearing, for the first time in person, the rattling of a skeleton in the American cupboard.

We sat down to eat. They brought a savoury-smelling dish of fried canned ham and beans and sweet corn. They also brought coffee.

The captain put a large helping of plum jam on the plate beside his meat and pushed the jam tin over to me.

"Have some," he suggested.

I explained apologetically that I'd rather let the ham and the jam mix lower down, as it were. He eyed me as if I was an anthropophagus. I almost felt like one.

He was a very hospitable chap and the kindness with which he looked after me, when he certainly had no need to, and the richness of the fare he offered made me feel like a poor relation.

This sensation was not diminished by the general air of richness which strikes one in an American sector; richness of clothes, equipment, food and everything you could want. The "poor relation" in me made me think it slightly parvenu, but I'm in favour of it all the same.

I returned to the beachmaster's command post and sat on the dunes waiting for the light to go. L.S.T. began to arrive. Two of them snuggled up to one another too closely and a fussy little barge pushed them apart as if to say: "Quit neckin' there, you two."

The L.S.T. had to unload before I could go on board, so I searched for a quiet slit trench to sleep in. A solicitous American matelet came up as soon as Ilford and I were wrapped up in our blankets and told us we could go and sleep in his dugout. He couldn't understand why we wouldn't move. It was much safer, he said.

He sat down and started saying how little he liked being bombed. Some of his mates drifted up and agreed. They were all a little vocal about it. No sir, they certainly didn't like being bombed at night, they said. I felt I ought to be saying, "There, there," or something, but that didn't seem quite right. It wasn't that they couldn't stand being bombed, they could take it all right, I knew. It was just that they talked about it more than we do.

Anyway, who the hell does like being bombed?

Most of them drifted away again, but the solicitous type stayed on talking. I was afraid he was going to regard this as the beginning of one of the Great Friendships of the War, and I wanted to sleep. But in the end he left.

Aircraft came over and started minelaying.. A Bofors gun about 30 yards away opened up and made me swear. Some of the most determined and accurate mosquitos I have ever met—bred, no doubt, in the flooded area behind the dunes—began to dive-bomb me.

In the end, however, sleep came.

Someone shook me and waved a torch in my face.

"Whatsamatter," I said, snorting.

"It's a quarter after three, lootenant. You can go aboard now."

There was a raid on. Not heavy, just tiresome. After three attempts I found an L.S.T. whose captain would take me over to England. They normally carried back casualties, and had three doctors on board. Having no casualties, the doctors took me in charge, while three or four sailors showed a childlike interest in what I was bringing on board. I didn't worry any more. There seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of coffee going, but I nearly finished it. There was also a hot shower as soon as we were afloat again. The doctors talked slowly and with the trans-atlantic deliberation I was beginning to know so well. There was, they said, a high percentage of casualties among their troops attributed to shell-shock—only they called it anxiety neurosis. I don't think our front-line troops suffer so much from it. We are less hysterical as a rule. (I don't mean braver, I mean less hysterical.)

The L.S.T. got her sailing orders. Up hook at 1530, in at Portland at 0500, the next day. (What was the next day? Sunday, Monday? I didn't know.) It would be about three weeks since I went into the concentration cage and twelve days since I landed. It felt like half a century.

The tension had gone out of life since D-day, and I now began to find out how tired I was feeling. In common with most of the Allied Expeditionary Force, I suppose I had averaged about three and a half hours sleep in the twenty-four lately. And it isn't really enough. I didn't feel up to coping with the ships' officers at first. They were probably a nice lot, but I felt very foreign still, with Americans. It felt as though I were a stone dropped into a pool. At times the two touched one another. The pool wet the stone and the stone sent ripples across the surface of the pool. But they did not mix.

They were kind people, though. To make me feel at home they brought out photographs of their homes, of which they all seemed to carry great packets about. I did my best to say what was polite and to sound interested. One of the doctors approached me and led me to the wardroom. We sat down. We lit cigarettes. We let down our back hair. He was older than most of the others and of mixed French and Scots blood, and more sophisticated than his colleagues, who seemed, at 25 to 30, to be grown-up children.

He had some grudge against England—particularly against London. It wasn't, he said, that he didn't like us. On the contrary, he had a lot of friends, and wanted more, amongst us. But why was it that Americans had to pay such a hell of a lot for food and drink in London? I told him they weren't the only ones. We compared prices. We both agreed that London was filled—when there wasn't any bombing—by the sort of things that crawl out from under stones. Bah! we said. We warmed to one another. We began to think that with the arrival of V.I London

might shake off some of its less agreeable accretions and take on something of the fresh charm it possessed in 1940 and '41.

They were so kindhearted all these people, particularly the naval men, that I began to think that I should feel a little shabby if I indulged in unkind remarks at their expense in the future. In fact I made a resolution not to. But resolutions are easy to break as you will see. Nor is the U.S. Army, as a whole, so easy to like as the U.S. Navy.

We were in a convoy of about 20 L.S.T. and an equal number of L.C.T. Even the monstrous whales of L.S.T. had a certain stolid majesty in convoy, and a convoy is a fine, symmetrical, purposeful sight to see, anyway.

The *Nelson* (or *Rodney*) passed us about five miles away, looking massive. I went below and turned in with a book by Bemelmann's called *Hotel Splendide*. A few hours later I woke again and went on deck in time to see our destroyer escort leaving us, and the Isle of Wight looming up in the dusk. We were turning westwards towards Portland. Down below in the wardroom I met the chief engineer, who, in his spare time, was the ship's joker. He was a first generation American of Central European parentage. A letter from his mother which he showed me was written in Hungarian or something. He passed through life with the air of if-you-aren't-amused-be-damned-to-you which one usually associates with Groucho Marx. His opening remark to me whenever we met was invariably:

"Yessir, lootenant, it certainly is a Great Day."

On this occasion he was complaining of a bug, caught, he averred, from one of the doctors, and was carrying a tin, marked in large letters: INSECTIDE POWDER FOR BODY-CRAWLING INSECTS.

So that American officialdom is not unlike our own, it appears. Just prone to verbal flatulence.

II

It was a fine sunny morning and Portland was almost pretty, seen from the roads, as we lay at anchor. But mere prettiness in view is not sufficient to compensate for a twelve hours' delay in landing. I was due back in Normandy almost before you could say Jean Robinson, and to a man with 48 hours' reprieve, even one hour wasted is intolerable.

At length we went alongside the Hard and I went ashore to find an American transport officer who, besides getting me a truck for my *objets d'art*, gave me about four doughnuts.

On board I said good-bye almost sadly to the ship's officers, not excluding the chief engineer (yessir, lootenant, it certainly was a Great Day). I tried to pay my mess bill and was thwarted. A poor relation went ashore, again tail between his legs.

Once ashore I could use the telephone, and did. To everyone concerned except her. Somehow I couldn't make myself ring her. Was it that I wasn't sure of my reception? I suppose so.

The duty staff officer in the dockyard and his fellow duty officers took a lot of interest in me. The duty Wren gave me cocoa and asked about things on the other side. I firmly prevented myself from shooting a line about it. But the poor relation's tail came out from between the legs. He began to feel he was someone almost interesting, someone people would be glad to see, like a long-lost cousin from Australia with the nuggets jingling in his pockets.

A sleepy-voiced American from Alabama drove me over to Naval Commander Expeditionary Force's headquarters. We lost the way ten times and I went to sleep, to wake up with a parrot-cage mouth, outside a large and ugly example of the stately homes of England.

Jim, bless his heart, was lying on a sofa asleep, waiting for me to arrive. With a restraint which I found truly admirable, he had ordered me a large whisky and kept it by him until my arrival. In his position I'd have drunk the thing long before 0200.

A.N.C.X.F.'s headquarters, where everything was done to routine, and people kept watches and knew when and where they would sleep and eat was almost unreal. It was also a little exasperating. They all seemed to be living at a slower rate than I was and to be almost unbearably stolid. But I didn't have to see many people, and soon I was on the way to London. I rang her up from the Admiralty.

"Good forenoon," I said when I heard her voice answering. (This was a little private joke we had against naval diction.)

"I can't believe it," she said. "I can't believe it. How soon can I see you?"

At once of course. (She might have known.)

A warmth and colour came into things, and just to be alive and to be going to see her was enough.

CHAPTER SIX

I

If you think I am going to tell you what I did with the 48 hours' reprieve I had, you're mistaken. Most of you, being uninquisitive English people, won't care anyway. Quite right.

V.R.'s weren't very nice. But London had, as I hoped it would, become the London it should be. It was no longer the sort of place one imagines Corinth to have been in the days when St. Paul addressed his two thunderous epistles to the Corinthians. Most of the lower forms of animal life had folded their tents like the Arabs. It was surprising, though, to find that women were so much affected by the German gadgets. Normally it is a truism that women are more stoical and many times braver than men under any kind of unpleasantness. Yet they seemed, as I say, to take the V.R. rather to heart. Perhaps, when the ordinary bombing was on, they had a kind of unspoken primeval sympathy with the pilots who were risking their lives to drop the bombs. They could have no such sympathy with a self-destroying robot.

One woman I heard of said: "I don't like this sort of bombing nearly so much as the other sort." (British capacity for under-statement.)

Another said: "It's the diabolicalness of it that gets you, isn't it, love?"

That summed it up pretty neatly, I thought.

Robert drove me down to Southampton. We tried to get some lunch at a foul little restaurant. It was 25 minutes before one of the six sluttish waitresses condescended to begin serving us with an unappetising and worse-than-colourless meal of a sort. I caught the dispatch boat, an American 83-foot coastguard cutter. An American colonel (with a hang-over) and I glared at each other for the first hour, and then held one another's heads for the remainder of the trip while the unspeakable little vessel danced about in every one of 365 different positions.

We went on board the U.S.S. *Ancon* again, and waited till morning, when I was told that there was no way of getting to the Utah area, except by land.

Ilford and I went ashore, and after a good deal of inquiry discovered that there was no official land transport to Utah either. We thumbed our way across, boarding jeep, half-track, jeep, 3-tonner, command car, jeep and jeep, until finally we reached Ste. M^{ere} Eglise.

No one knew where the rest of the party had got to, so I entered a building marked:

CIVIL AFFAIRS
BUREAU DES AFFAIRES CIVILES

Inside there was a microcosm of the storming of the Bastille with which two British, two American and one Canadian officer were trying

to cope. I felt sorry for them. None of them appeared to have progressed further in their study of the French language than the Anglo-Saxon "Esker-voo" stage. It must have been very difficult.

I approached the counter, elbowing my way past a number of very voluble Gallic gentlemen.

"Keskervoo desiray?" said a captain.

He was rather pleased to find I spoke a little English, and asked me to lunch. He also had an idea as to where I'd find the rest of my unit. It wasn't more than $2\frac{1}{2}$ kilometres away, according to the signposts, so I decided to walk it. Unfortunately the French kilometre varies between about half a mile and two and a half. So that in the end it was actually five miles that I walked. The road was hot and dusty, and I was really almost pleased to see a certain marine captain whose company I would normally walk an equal distance to avoid.

He said he was in charge of the rear party, but that the remainder were up near Cherbourg. He knew where they were, he said, and immediately started driving me in exactly the opposite direction. I pointed out that the distance to Cherbourg was increasing as we went along and that if we went on long enough we should find ourselves surrounded by men in field-grey uniform. He turned and drove in the correct direction. We passed through Valognes and Montebourg, two disgusting, shattered shells of what were once pretty towns, through Bricquebec and Quettetot, the former sounding like the name of a child's game, the latter like a patent corn-plaster.

As if by a miracle we came upon the Cherbourg force at about eight p.m. Roger and Guy weren't there, but at some not-very-clearly-marked place on a map, miles from anywhere. The party was under command of a marine officer. But Gordon McLeod was there, and a figure—so well camouflaged that I didn't recognise him at first—which was Derek.

"Ma Goad," said Gordon, "whaur did ye get that bit of fluff on your face?"

We felt better for seeing one another and sat down to indulge in a little tooth-sucking about life in general.

One-hundred-and-five-mm. guns were firing over our heads from behind us at regular intervals. From time to time medium bombers flew over towards Cherbourg 5 miles away. If we were lucky the bombs dropped near Cherbourg. If we weren't they dropped near us. A marine dug three snipers out of a hedge 50 yards away, in a thoughtful way. We asked them who the hell they thought they were and they said sailors who'd been impressed for the shoreward defence of Cherbourg and didn't like it much.

At intervals orders would be given that everyone was to be at 5 minutes' notice to move up in the direction of Cherbourg. A little later the orders would be countermanded.

According to Gordon this had been going on every day for about four days, and each evening, as a rule, everyone would be marched back to just behind the bombarding artillery.

It all struck me as being very much the procedure for which the Grand Old Duke of York is so justly renowned.

"Peter, it's done me guid to see ye," said Gordon, "can ye no stay a wee bit longer?"

I couldna.

The M.O. drove me back in the thickening dusk to find Roger and Guy. They were living in an Organisation Todt caravan on the fringe of the big robot-launching site at Sottevaast, in considerable comfort. It appeared that Roger had long since decided that the Duke of York tactics didn't suit him, and was biding his time until Cherbourg really should fall.

It was rather difficult to find their camp, and would, indeed, have been impossible but for the fact that Roger was already known to most of the surrounding countryside as *L'officier anglais barbu—comme il est gentil*.

II

Twice during the night I got up to inspect the guard but I was only half-awake and, as soon as I reached my sleeping-bag, went off again to sleep like a stone. The first news I had of a new day was from Guy. I woke up unwillingly to see him standing over me, looking like something that ought to be dancing on a bare mountain on St. Walpurga's night.

"It's nearly eight," he said in a frenzied way.

Der besoffener Feldwebel hadn't detailed anyone off for the last watch before reveille, and so no one had been at hand to wake the camp. I'd arrived too late to see that he had done his job properly, and one could be morally certain that unless one sat on his tail he wouldn't.

He was duly given a bottle and spent the remainder of the day looking grieved.

"We're moving in closer to-day," said Roger, and pointed out a position near Teurteville. I took charge of the move while Roger and Guy went up to call on the forward party.

After an hour or so's drive I got my force into a peaceful-looking orchard on a slope at the bottom of which was a small stream. We brewed up and I lay down to sleep after making sure that the chaps had adequate shelter. It didn't look too bad a place to settle down in. I dozed off in the uncertain sunlight.

There were several enormous crashes and I found myself being moodily stared at by a crowd of surly-looking heifers. No, it wasn't shelling. It was just a battery of 150-mm. guns in the next orchard, firing towards Cherbourg. They jerked me so violently with their

hideous shouts that I had to read instead of sleeping. A German spotting-plane came over so I began to expect counter-battery.

Roger and Guy at length returned. They'd had a fair amount of shelling. Some marines had been killed and the marine officer commanding the forward party had been hit on the head by a shell splinter, and was going round looking rather slap-happy.

I told them about the spotting plane. They became conscious of the presence of the battery. We moved about a mile farther east and found a pleasant rural spot under the protecting bosom of a little hill, and on the edge of the same little stream. To reach it you had to go down a narrow, rather muddy lane; but it was quiet and you could lie down at full length and bathe in the stream. In fact Guy used always, while we were there, to go and play at being a naiad before breakfast.

It began to rain so I put up a tent with the aid of a couple of marines. In view of the possibility of counter-battery I made the marines dig slit-trenches, and for the sake of the exercise we three dug ourselves in under the tent. As we lay down to sleep my memory was flooded with the lines of a sixteenth century hymn which we used to sing at prayers in the Great Hall at school on the first day of each term (almost smothered we were by a bare, clean, soapy smell and by home-sickness).

“Teach me to live that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed. . . .”

In a sombre mood, I thought too of Richard II and

“a little, little grave, an obscure grave.”

There was many a seventeenth century farmer who used to sleep in his coffin once or twice a week so as to accustom himself to it. I felt I had something in common with such gentry. I also hoped that our opposite numbers on the German side were having to dig themselves in as well.

We passed from hand to hand a bottle of Grand Marnier which someone had found. It probably kept out the cold and wet. We wondered next morning where the drink had gone. The bottle was empty. Guy accused me.

The rain was coming down more and more viciously, and it was a generally filthy, soggy morning. The lane leading to our camp became a little river of thick creamy mud. I set the marines to putting down thin brushwood in the ruts and drove off with Roger and Guy for Cherbourg. We got to Octeville where the forward party had their headquarters in the school. Octeville is a mile or so outside Cherbourg, but from it you can see the harbour. Parts of the place were still held by the Germans, and you crossed a street quickly and bore in mind what the street-fighting experts had taught you.

The roads to Cherbourg had numerous dead Germans lying on the verges. They were, as dead men are after a day or so, a beastly greenish-yellow waxen colour and, as day followed day and they remained unburied, they began to smell. The smell of dead men is just a little more unpleasant than that of dead animals. It is sweeter and less rank and therefore all the more disgusting. No other smell in the world is like it. It was five days before these corpses were removed.

After a sodden lunch I took a party of a sergeant and ten marines towards Urville-Hague, west of Cherbourg. At a cross-roads I was stopped by frenzied hooting from an American truck. Out of it leapt an American major. He had heard of us and, being on the same sort of job, had been trying to make contact with us.

"TRING'S ma name," he said, clasping me far too firmly by the hand. "T-R-I-N-G."

I felt he must have been one of the heartier sort of insurance salesmen in real life. We made a date to meet in an hour's time. Never having seen him again I can only assume he went breezing into the German H.Q. saying:

"Here ah am. TRING'S ma name. T-R-I-N-G. Hey! You're Heinies. Waal, that's kinda coorious. The British said they'd be here."

The British weren't there till three hours later.

We couldn't get to Urville. An hour-and-a-half's exploration of ways and means assured me that the approaches were held by larger numbers of Germans than I could cope with.

So I reported back to the school at Octeville and left with Roger and Guy to make for the German H.Q.

As we arrived, General von Schlieben was just emerging to surrender with his 600 or 700 men. There was a cloying, rubbery feeling in the air. I met it many times during the campaign. It is the aftermath of battle.

The headquarters was a large underground complex of tunnels, dug out of rock under a villa. The garden of the villa contained dead Germans and there were a few at the entrance to the tunnels, lying with glazing, puzzled eyes. A smell of hot men and high explosive infested the tunnels. We kept a German Diesel mechanic to look after the auxiliary generator, and there were still a number of German wounded waiting to be evacuated. I stumbled on an argument between a marine and a German colonel who had been wounded in the stomach. The marine wanted to inspect the colonel's personal luggage. The colonel didn't want to part with it. I felt almost sorry for the colonel. A stomach wound must be damned painful. I restrained my sympathy and insisted politely but firmly. (After all, a month or two, a year or two before, the colonel was no doubt glorying in the destruction done by the Luftwaffe, or registering indifference to the sufferings of occupied Europe.)

I turned over a log-book in the signal station of the H.Q. Von Schlieben showed himself in a poor light, I thought, for his last signal back to German Army Group H.Q. was to say that a certain fort in Cherbourg had surrendered and that the commandant of the fort was *Feiger* (was a coward). No doubt the said commandant's family in Germany would suffer for this. It was rather telling tales out of school.

Back in camp the local farmer's wife came up in a toss and tear. One of her daughters had been living with a German who had been shot three days before by the Americans. She had offered the daughter's services to us as cook (opportunism). Now the daughter had had her head shorn by the inhabitants of the village and would not come to us.

We all felt a little spent as we returned to camp. We had had a day of foul weather, of moderate excitement, savouring German smells, of clambering up and down and in and out of not very delectable situations. We had been shelled leaving the German H.Q. and had to dive for cover for twenty minutes or so. I think "spent" is the adjective to use.

It is a curious thing about that particular shelling. I am not an adventurous man. I wish no part in war. I dislike being frightened; and yet when Guy and Roger came back and said they had been shelled the day before I felt frustrated, jealous almost. This shelling this afternoon though fatiguing and frightening, because so close, did me good. I felt cleaner and better for it.

As I say, I dislike being frightened, and yet unless I was pretty often in a position of danger I always felt I wasn't doing enough. A minefield, booby-traps or delay-action charges were not sufficient. Inexplicable, infuriating, half-witted, I thought myself. But reason had no part in such an attitude and I could not scold myself out of it.

III

We lived on at our wet but peaceful camp for four days or so. The lane became muddier each day. The vehicles skated and slithered along it. The wind freshened but, being still westerly, brought only more rain. There were intervals but only short ones, of finer weather.

As soon as we could, we entered the dock area. It had been fairly thoroughly demolished and was not cleared of mines or snipers. A U.S. lieutenant went in with us. During our wanderings he went off by himself, a thing we made a practice of not doing. At the end of the day he was nowhere to be found, and as the port of Cherbourg is a large place we did not search for him, thinking he had found his own way back to the U.S. Navy H.Q. He had not. He was not found for a week. When at length the port party found him he was seen to have been shot through the head from below, presumably by a German concealed

in the underground post into which he was peering when he died. It was cold-blooded and rather horrible to think of, as it had none of the relative impersonality of battle, only the beastliness of a murder.

We were trigger-conscious in the dock area and picked our way in twos and threes about it. I began to hate the brittle crunch of broken glass under foot, the orgiastic sight of half-empty bottles and slowly mouldering food, the Aryan smell.

We visited the E-boat pens. Plenty of time had been available to render them useless, and ingenuity and many torpedo warheads had been used in their destruction. Great reinforced concrete walls 10 and 15 feet thick had been shattered. Irregular lumps of concrete 100 cubic feet in volume had been blown 100 yards. Enormous girders were lying twisted and torn like paper. The pens themselves were large, cavernous, cathedral-like structures, magnificent in their usefulness and strength and sparse simplicity. In one of them a barge was still on fire, filling the air with dense, smarting smoke.

Bill Jeffries and I picked our way round to the Fort du Homet. The Digue had been blown in several places and it was quite a job to get there. We were rapturously greeted by a rather hysterical American sergeant who had been a prisoner there for two days and who told us the whole place was booby-trapped. It wasn't.

One of the outermost forts guarding the harbour entrance was still in German hands. It was preventing the minesweepers from clearing the port. It had refused to surrender—contumeliously tearing the American flag in two before American eyes. We watched a squadron of fighter bombers attack it. It put up a very gutty and spirited show with its flak. On the way out of Cherbourg we passed, on an unfamiliar route, many more German dead. Amongst the bodies were the recumbent forms of workmen. At first I thought they, too, were dead because of their waxen pallor and of the uncomfortable attitudes in which they lay. But they were alive because I saw them move a little, listlessly. They were Todt workers. Poor devils; they and their brothers elsewhere in France must be among the saddest flotsam of the war. Of all nationalities and tongues, underfed, hopeless, bomb-happy because subjected to the same attacks as their masters, cut off from their old familiar far-off life they can only continue to live by reason of the unwillingness of mankind in general, when it comes to the point, to submit to death.

That was one of our days, another typical one started off with two tiresome incidents both accidental, both the result of carelessness by marines. At 0200, just as I'd dozed off after visiting the sentries, I was woken up to attend to one of the troop who had fallen down a pit about six or eight feet deep on his way back from the latrine and damaged his back. I plugged him with morphine to reduce the pain, and finding his back was not broken, left him till morning. At 0600 I was just finishing my bath, shivering a bit and completely naked, when Ilford

came and announced that one of the marine drivers, an adenoidal moron, had caught fire.

By the time I got to him the fire was out, but he had a nasty petrol burn over the hand and wrist and was moaning piteously. I bandaged the hand and plugged him with morphine and sent him off post-haste to a medico.

It was going, I could see, to be that sort of day. Guy and I went off to examine a munitions depot a mile or two from Cherbourg. It was a devil of a job finding it. We asked Americans, Frenchmen, everybody; I even thought of asking a rather knowing-looking old horse, but he eyed me so contemptuously that I reconsidered the idea.

In the end we came upon it in a neatly hidden valley near a village called Nardouët. It had surrendered 36 hours before, and as we arrived the American Medical Corps were taking it over for the following reason. As the attack on the Cotentin peninsula developed the Germans had decided that Cherbourg was no longer safe for their wounded. They accordingly moved out about 1,200 men with medical staff to attend to them, to the tunnels in which the munitions had been stored. There they all were, mostly apathetic enough, but with some particularly venomous-looking nurses, the quintessence obviously of what A. Hitler admired in the German woman.

The American doctor in charge shook us by the hand. After we had talked a little he exclaimed:

“Say, am I glad to see you-all.”

He was, we gathered, a little worried lest some of his wounded or their attendants should turn out to be S.S. fanatics who would lay charges among the munitions to blow the whole lot and him sky high.

He was a little, podgy, friendly man, bubbling over with intelligence and spirit. We liked him a lot.

It was, however, a tiring day, to be succeeded by another just as tiring. The Germans had used the place pretty exhaustively for eating, sleeping, defoecating, vomiting and being wounded in, and the atmosphere was therefore unsympathetic. There was also no light except from our torches. We took it in turns to go out for a breather and a cigarette. Smoking may be a filthy habit, but burning tobacco is a cleaner aroma than many I've met.

Passing back to the camp through Cherbourg on one of our treks, I had a fit of the dumps. An abandoned German 88 mm. gun on the roadside, painted green, lying with its muzzle-brake buried in the earth, took on the appearance of an expiring dragon. Over one of the approach roads hung a banner saying:

“BIENVENUE AUX ALLIES
VIVENT LES LIBERATEURS”

I remarked to Guy that it looked so clean and new that no doubt

the liberators had brought it themselves and arranged for its hanging by the liberated. I was feeling cheaply cynical.

In the Rue Montebello in Cherbourg a couple of blowsy off-blonde women hung out of a brothel window in a half-hearted way. There was a mild scrum round the door. It showed, as far as I could judge, that the oldest profession was finding no difficulty in adapting itself to the altered situation.

I even thought at that time (God help me, so depressed and distorted I was) that that typified the attitude of France. How foolish and how wrong.

As we passed through Cherbourg we saw people streaming back from village and farm into the town pushing before them wheelbarrows and prams full of their own belongings, hoping to find their homes intact. Cherbourg itself seemed like a place waking up from a nightmare and finding life not to be so bad after all.

I was deeply moved with compassion and, as a healthier successor to the cynicism which had earlier occupied my thoughts, murmured to myself a half-remembered verse from the Elizabethan play of Sir Thomas More which, I believe, is partly attributed to Shakespeare).

“Imagine that you see the wretched strangers
Their babies at their backs, and their poor luggage,
Plodding to the ports and coasts . . .”

Next week, perhaps, cafés would open and men and women with a little leisure would be sitting and talking in them. The mines crippling the port would be gone and work would offer itself. The place would begin to take on a busy hum not unlike its peacetime self.

It was to be hoped.

Another day after tramping the countryside we passed through a village which had not previously been visited by the Americans at all, though near to Cherbourg. All the children danced out to meet us crying: *Vivent les Alliés. Vive la Liberté.* We gave them sweets and were most sweetly embraced by them. A little farther on and we paused by what had been a farm. Through no fault of the owners it had found itself the neighbour of a flak battery and had suffered a heavy air bombardment. The wretched farmer's wife arrived back at her home as we sat there over our midday meal. I have never seen anyone so sad. I was already tired of the sight of ruin myself but to see this woman and her five children come back as returning fugitives to the wreck of their home and begin to try, pathetically, to clear it up, was unbearable.

I gave her chocolate and biscuits and anything we could spare. It seemed a poor amend for what she had suffered. (Her husband was

in Germany these four years, she said.) She wept a little, quietly but bitterly, and I was embarrassed and ashamed.

It needed a pawky, Cockney remark from Ilford to cheer me.

"I've been looking all over for one of these Free French girls, sir. But they all seem to belong to this 'ere Resistance Movement."

As we supped, Jeannine, Pierre and Jacques (aged 4, 5 and 7) visited us from one of the farms near by with an egg for each of the officers, bless them, and some milk for the morning coffee. It was pouring with rain and we lent them a large mackintosh to shelter under on the way home.

Like the majority of French children we met they were enchanting little creatures, lithe, clean, unselfconscious. They and the horses we saw so many of, were among the compensations for other sights less agreeable. There are great riches in a country which breeds such children.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

FOR four days we stayed at the camp spending our days until nightfall, or beyond, on the job. The Americans turned southwards and the countryside began to feel less crowded. The sound of gunfire stopped and normality began to rear its head in Cherbourg.

Guy and I eventually broke up the camp and in a blinding rain-storm drove 24 kilometres to the unit's new headquarters at Carteret on the west side of the peninsular. It is a phenomenon I noted at the time that these 24 kilometres seemed a long distance. Cherbourg to Carentan, about 50 kilometres, was a day's journey. Carteret to Bayeux I found almost impossible to imagine in a day. The tiny corner of France which had been carved out since D-day seemed for some reason to be much larger than it was. A contributory reason for this impression was, perhaps, that by this time a million or more men were concentrated in the area, and I do not know how many thousand vehicles. As a result of this the main roads and especially those served by bridges, as at Carentan, were jammed with slow-moving traffic driven by exasperated men striving to be patient. The armies were squeezed in like people in a railway carriage during a rush-hour. You felt you couldn't move your elbows.

Carteret was a damp spot. If the weather was fine, which was seldom, you could see Jersey 10 miles or so to the west, so close that you almost felt as if you could reach it.

Carteret was also a pretty spot, though no prettier than the rest of the coast up the western side of the Cherbourg peninsular. Duty took me up during the next few days to Cap de la Hague and round to Omonville-la-Rogue. The coast and the country behind is like Dorsetshire, but a little barer. One or two charming little ports serve it, Dielette and Carteret being those I saw most of. We took over a group of villas lying up on the cliff above Carteret and encircled by the Corniche road. Below us a tiny estuary, a toy place, curled gently to the south-east to Barneville. It dried out almost in spring tides and there were tricky currents. Below the cliffs to the west was a clean, brisk little bay, with a fine beach from which we bathed.

It was a perfect place for a rest camp, except for its climate, damp and enervating. Yet it carried something of the atmosphere of Wuthering Heights. I attributed this to the presence of the marines. So did most of us. We were really only happy away from it. We were living on American rations which are in many ways excellent, but the food always tasted just wrong, for which I blame the marines for allowing an oily three-badge corporal to allege that he was catering. Somehow the place

was unsympathetic and the lack of sympathy permeated the food, the talk, even the very camp-bed one slept on—though in other places the same camp-bed would be welcoming and kindly.

To give the beds at least a chance, I arranged to move the naval party into another house—after cleaning it out. We left on the doors the old German notices: *Schlafzimmer*, *Tagesraum*, *Speiseraum*, and so forth, but removed all other traces of *Herrenvolk*.

We felt very much better after we'd moved in there. In front of the house, we marked an area, raised a flag-pole, and called it the quarter-deck. There we had "colours" each morning. We had watches, we ran the thing as though it were a ship. Oh, much better, it was.

In a sort of lodge near the gate slept Ilford and Roger's batman, Briggs, and Roger's scout car driver, MacDonald. Briggs was a Cockney—or near-Cockney. MacDonald, as the name implies, was a Scot, and very dour. Yet these two diversities became so complementary to one another (until, by a subtle move, I pinched MacDonald from Roger) that one looked almost undressed without the other.

To celebrate the change of quarters we threw a house-warming party. To it, Roger asked one or two of the French families living in the place. In particular, he asked Jeanne and her mother. Jeanne was a very pretty, though slightly lumpy, blonde. She was a Parisienne with considerable chic and nice colouring and a clear skin. The only thing against her was that she'd been given gum by some Americans and chewed it. It was not chic. Roger tried to persuade himself and us that he was being avuncular in his interest in the wench. He even filled me with enough enthusiasm to wash behind my ears before I met her the first time. We mocked him a good deal about her.

After the house-warming we were feeling as the Romans would say, "*dilutior*" with wine, and sallied out when we had had dinner to the Hotel d'Angleterre. An odd situation was developing. The uppermost floor of the hotel was inhabited by a French concert party from Paris who had been trapped at Carteret by the Allied landing. The other floors had been commandeered by the U.S. Army. It was never in any doubt that a brisk trade was done. You would see the girls leaning out of upper floor windows in pastel-shade dressing gowns and a lot of make-up at almost any hour. They themselves were quite frank. Any time, they said, except between two and four in the afternoon when we rehearse for the show.

Later the town was put "off limits" or, as the British Army has it, out of bounds. I wasn't surprised.

On the night of our first visit, however, the Army hadn't yet moved in. We arrived to find an impromptu dance going on. Several of the marines were cheek to cheek with a floozie. We—Roger and I and Gordon and others—stepped timorously into the room. An excited little dwarf rushed up to us.

"*Je suis CACAU,*" he remarked in a thunderous contralto. "*Tout le monde me connaît.*"

We said of course we'd heard of him, his name was on everyone's lips in London. We tried to find the manager and make arrangements for a kind of show for the troops. The manager was a sleek bounder in a too-well-cut blue suit. He wanted 10,000 francs. We hedged.

Cacau began to dance with another male member of the troupe who was wearing a hair-net. We beat a retreat, fearing he might ask one of us to dance next.

II

All told, it was easy to be bored at Carteret. The chaps were all bored with nothing to do but conform to barracks routine. We were all bored with an apparently futile existence. There seemed to be little enough for us to do on the beachhead. The elastic line held by the Germans stretched and gave and then contracted again. For nearly three weeks it extended from the coast ten miles south of us through La Haye du Puits down to St. Lo, four or five miles south of Carentan; thence it bent south-east and bulged out west of Caen. Bloody fighting was continually in force round and north-west of Caen. Thence the line ran down to the canal between Caen and Ouistreham. On the other side of the canal we had advanced pockets of airborne and commandos. Slowly, and how slowly it seemed to us, the forces on our side of the elastic line swelled. General Patton's army was injected through the beaches, through St. Vaast and Barfleur, and later through Cherbourg. Men and guns and machines and stores forced themselves ashore through Arromanches. It felt as though soon the elastic would break with a faint twanging noise and our people would pour through somewhere.

It seemed as if everyone had a job to do, everyone was fighting, except us. There was nothing to read. Letters were few and far between. We were less in the war than London where they did at least have V.R.'s every hour to buck them up.

I went through the unit's pay documents. We received letters from the accountant officer complaining that this man had received 15s 9d. too much up to the end of May, that man 4s. 2d. It seemed very unimportant as no one had drawn any pay since the end of May anyway. I left most of the letters to dree their own weird.

An aeroplane was stated to appear each night and circle over the house. The wettest marine officer (unfortunately) took it on himself to go and ask the G.2 at Corps about it. Being told that it was German, he is said to have remarked in tones of horror: "Then we may expect a spot of bombing, eh?" The marines stood to at dusk and dawn. We could never understand why. But we drank the cocoa that was left out to cheer them after stand-to.

A funny little Frenchman was found one morning wandering all over our quarters. I asked him what he was doing. "Reading the electric light meter," he replied.

"But," I said, "there's been no electricity here since June 8th, and before that the Germans had the house. Who will pay?"

"Oh," he replied, with an ineffable Gallic shrug, "*L'Etat or La République* or whatever *le bon Dieu* gives us for a government after the war."

He effaced himself.

It was worth remarking while on the subject of governments, that in every French town or village, almost, through which one passed, there were notices acclaiming General de Gaulle. I was glad that the British Government had stood by him as the majority of Frenchmen I talked to seemed to want him, and therefore ought to have him. After all, it's their life and their country.

The psychological warfare braves called on us and threatened to fix us up with electric light. They had brought over a generator in order to work a printing press somewhere down near Angers (I think it was). Later they used it for showing films in the local dance hall. They all looked excessively military in the manner of such people. One had a monocle, one had riding-breeches and one had (I believe) two teeth.

As a variant to ordinary routine we would take the scout cars out and instruct the drivers in how to beat a hasty retreat. One of us would sit in a jeep pretending to be a Tiger tank—that genial creation of German technique. Another would come full speed along the road. He would stop as soon as he sighted the "foe," turn, and get the hell out of it into cover. It was good practice and came in useful at a later stage.

Guy and I took it in turns to instruct the marines in laying demolition charges. It was a bit of a strain making sure that 50 marines set off 50 charges during a morning without someone emerging from cover at an awkward moment. Still, no one was damaged.

One morning three marines strayed off behind the lighthouse into a known minefield. What persuaded them to go I do not know. They were having a stand-easy during instruction and I imagine they wanted to see if the pretty things worked. Or perhaps they were almost as blasé about minefields as Guy and I were becoming.

At any rate I put them under arrest—protective custody it might be called—went about 20 yards beyond where they had got to, dug out a couple of *Schuhminen* and shook them in front of their faces. They turned a little pale I was glad to see. So they well might.

Two days later three others went into the same minefield. One of them returned minus a foot. I felt sorry for the blighter all the same. As he hadn't been on duty when it happened there would be endless arguments about his pension.

It rained a good deal of the time.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

As an obverse side to the coin described in the previous chapter, I should say at once that there was a certain amount of action as well. Really only about a third of our time was spent at Carteret, and even when we were there things seemed to happen sometimes.

One of the Admiralty pundits signalled us that he was about to honour us with a visit. We none of us liked him much. He was one of those very superior professorial type R.N.V.R.s who got their claws into Their Lordships early in the war and have kept them in ever since. As our proprietary deity he felt himself entitled to demand offerings of Camembert and libations of captured cognac of the better sort (But my dear feller this stuff's undrinkable!) from time to time. He also interfered with us on a high level.

This time his arrival coincided with the date on which Roger had decided to go to London to see him. So a furious Roger drafted the following signal:

"Quite understand X's desire to leave London at present juncture but would point out that this H.Q. not entirely safe as Germans only 10 miles away."

It is probably as well it was never transmitted.

X arrived and we fed him to the best of our ability. We sat on the veranda sipping some cognac which he described as passable. He shot a line about the dangers of life in London. He enlarged on the imminence of V.2. After a little I began to get the cold shudders about the weapon—not for my sake but because she and my family both live in London. I began to question within myself whether what military correspondents are pleased to call our grand strategy had been right, and whether perhaps a half million casualties on the coast of the Pas de Calais would not have been worth while to save the people behind the lines. It is as well, I often think nowadays, that I wasn't General Montgomery or I should have given way to such ideas—just as the Germans would have wanted.

While we were talking one of the marine sentries reported that a pilot had baled out of an allied aircraft in trouble and landed in the sea. Roger immediately leaped to his feet and began to cast about for means of getting him in.

X said: "Roger, it's no use your rushing around indulging in air/sea rescue work. That's not what you are paid for."

Roger turned on him in a fury and replied:

"For heaven's sake forget that bloody green stripe for a little. I

only hope you find yourself in the drink by yourself one day. Then you'll think differently."

We knocked up M. Rachine, a local fisherman, and within about ten minutes he had some of his colleagues and a boat ready. Which was a damned good show. They might have been at immediate notice from the speed with which they set out. The Quack and Tommy went out with them.

Unfortunately, the tide had been ebbing so much and the current had swept the pilot so far towards Jersey that M. Rachine could not guarantee getting back to Carteret, so we had perforce to leave him until the tide changed. A watch was set, up on the cliff, and he was flashed at frequent intervals so that he would know someone was looking out for him. In the early morning M. Rachine picked him up and he came into the mess for breakfast. He was a very cool customer, a R.A.F. flight-lieutenant. His first remark on being picked up was to the effect that he disliked Horlick's malted milk tablets. The only other thing that worried him was the possibility of the fishing vessel being shot up by Allied pilots. We had fixed that, however.

He also announced that he'd slept most of the time while waiting to be picked up, as he knew very well where he was, and had no doubts as to whether he was near hostile or friendly shores. I'll say he was cool. After a riotous evening with M. Rachine and his boys and us, during which he was somewhat incongruously presented by the town of Carteret with a bouquet, he left to rejoin his station. That is the R.A.F., that was.

II

"Tom," I said; "Come over to St. Vaast with me. There's a job there."

Tom looked up at me and then at the rain, and said "corstrewth," or something. But he came. It was only about 25 miles to St. Vaast, but what with a jeep drive and so on, we hadn't much left on us that was dry when we arrived.

In a great flurry of rain I searched out the U.S. naval authority, a second generation Italo-American, who in real life coached a football side at a university. I'd met him before on the Utah beaches. He was a nice little man, rather like Chico Marx.

A storm was brewing up and he was busy with all the L.C.T. who were scuttling into the tiny harbour from the beaches for shelter. But he took us as a matter of course, so that we felt as if as far as he was concerned we were a part of the rain and the storm and other manifestations of the cussedness of things.

After an abortive afternoon we drove along the coast road towards Barfleur looking for shelter for the night. It didn't seem that we should find it easily. It wasn't like a forward area where you can generally

find a house somewhere. There were dozens of U.S. troops milling around all over the place. But suddenly I saw a deserted house built on the sea wall with its shutters closed and barbed wire and minefield notices round it. There weren't any French about to ask, so I decided to take a chance on its being mined and picked my way through the garden.

The house had no furniture at all, but there was a large fireplace and there was no smell, so we set up quarters there. In an outhouse I discovered the reason why the house was deserted by French and Americans alike. The safety-pins of about 50 mines were hung up on a nail there, and on the floor was a copy of the German instructions for laying the mines.

The only snag about the place was the mosquitoes; to overcome this and to dry our clothes I told the marines to light a big fire in the grate. They took me too literally and, with a lack of moderation I was beginning to regard as characteristic of the Royal Marines Corps succeeded in setting the chimney on fire and filling the house with a dense acrid smoke. Till Tom and I, at bedtime, could not see each other, though our beds were only 4 feet apart. It became a race between two lieutenants R.N.V.R. and about 2,000 mosquitoes, which should die first. It was purely a matter of animal cunning that kept Tom and me from succumbing.

Next morning I got up at six and saw Marine Reynolds, my driver, in conversation with six American soldiers. This was the conversation:

Reynolds: "Want anything?"

U.S. sergeant: "Ssh!"

(All the American soldiery cock their rifles.)

Reynolds: "I said, want anything?"

U.S. sergeant: "Ssh! There's some Heinies in that house."

Reynolds: "Never noticed them and I've been in there all night."

It then dawned on me. Some French children must have told the Americans about us, who, in spite of my having reported our presence, deduced that we were Germans. I ventured out and explained the situation. They were a little angry. So was I by the time we'd finished. I warned them to look out for mines and had the satisfaction of seeing them pick their way cautiously out along a path that was actually clear.

Wounded feelings thus assuaged and breakfast done, we drove to Quinéville, a nasty little wreck of a place, where the Germans had experimented with beach obstacles and defences. There they all were; anti-tank ditches, Tobruk pits, sawn-off tank turrets in concrete, iron tetrahedra, "element C's," posts with *Teller* mines attached, everything; the whole place backed with great concrete gun emplacements. It was too bad that the landings had taken place 15 miles farther south.

After the job was done and while we were waiting for lunch, I overheard a conversation between Reynolds and a local inhabitant which savoured of an 1880 *Punch* cartoon:

Local inhabitant: "Voulez-vous me donner un peu d'essence pour travailler?"

Reynolds: "Yus, that's right. That's where we come from."

(Complete collapse of old gentleman who thought it was Thursday).

III

The drive to Caen from Carteret is not prepossessing, and just beyond Bayeux you were in those days apt to meet streams of jammed traffic hundreds of yards long.

There was an embargo on entry into Caen, and only those who had urgent business might go into or through the town.

When you did enter you found out why.

I think Caen was the most unspeakably sad sight I have ever seen. I never knew it as it had been, but Jim, who did, said it was one of the loveliest places in France. When I went there, there was a story that the Strategic Air Forces, having been ordered to attack concentrations of German armour in a wood two or three miles away, bombed instead the medieval town, which suffered the obscene violence of 5,000 tons of high explosive. Parts of the town and of the old portions, too, still stand; but for the most it is a gashed, ugly mass of rubble, more atrocious than ever by reason of the skeleton which still remains of its former loveliness. (Even St. Lo, more completely demolished, is less offensive to the sight than Caen.)

Under that rubble were the bodies of between 2,000 and 4,000 Frenchmen. It had been hot and thundery for two days when we got there and it was then ten days since the bombardment, so that the stink in the streets was appalling.

And the look of stunned unhappiness which was to be found in the eyes of the people of Caen was not a thing to meet; if you didn't like being haunted.

We pushed southwards along the canal until we found a bridge ringed with our artillery who were thudding away, such crews as were off duty frolicking in the canal. At length we came to the Caen shipyard where occasional shells passed over us or landed measurably close; and, using a painting lighter as ferry, went on board a half-sunk German *Vorpostenboot*. She had a 30° list after being damaged by shellfire, and someone had apparently died in the engine room and stayed there. Working between decks I found it necessary to keep a lighted cigarette always in my mouth.

Guy, who had taken me over there, excelled himself. I gave him my packet of cigarettes. He took one and, in throwing the packet down to me again, hurled it into the bilges. Then he dropped a hammer on to my toe and finally let fall a D/F aerial over my head. I mean to say!

Just as we were lowering a piece of apparatus which closely resembled an armoured grandfather clock over the side an irate marine officer appeared on the bank 50 yards away.

"I say," he shouted.

"Yes," we said.

"Who are you?"

"What's it got to do with you?"

"Don't take anything from that ship."

"Sorry, we must."

"Well, I must get authorisation for this."

"All right, go ahead and get it."

"I'll be about an hour. Don't go till I get back."

"Nuts."

We didn't wait, of course. The man must have been crazy. Who would have done so?

Back we drove again, 95 hot and dusty miles, and Guy and I kept each other supplied with cigarettes, limiting ourselves to one for each major town we reached, viz.: Bayeux - Isigny - Carentan - Montebourg - Bricquebec - Carteret. We didn't bother to wash out the dirt but waited till next day when we could bathe in the little bay.

It had been a good day though rather lively from the point of view of shellfire. The Caen-Ouistreham Canal is a lovely peaceful thing, 60 yards wide and lined with trees. Heaven in peace-time, I expect. And it had been good to go back again to the British sector. It seemed to me that though at that time the British Army was moving slowly, it was ten times more efficient than the American, and had far more dash and spirit. I liked too, seeing again the little coloured tactical signs for different units, with numbers to indicate who they were representing. They added a touch of colour to the roadsides. Even the men looked smarter and more alert. Battledress is a good rig. Furthermore, our chaps seem to wash much more than the Americans do. You never see an American soldier stripped off and washing all over in a teaspoonful of water. They wait three weeks till they can get a shower.

You can tell the difference as soon as you meet an M.P. for instance. The British or Canadian M.P. is a highly trained article. He is quiet and well-spoken and knows his job involves answering questions sometimes. So that he will always produce an answer quickly. Four times out of five it's the right answer; the fifth time you take your chance.

The American M.P. by comparison is a rough, ill-trained hick. He has four standard answers to questions:

(1) "I don't know" ("sir"—optional).

(2) "I've only been here two days."

(3) "What's it to you anyway?"

(4) "Well, that just beats the hell outa me."

But most of all the difference is in the tactical signs. As I say, I like

our little coloured signs with numbers on them. They add a touch of gaiety, of glamour even, to the dusty roadside.

In the American sector they use a mumbo-jumbo of code-names: thus, army H.Q. is "Master," corps H.Q. "Jayhawk," divisional H.Q. "Madonna" or "Notorious," a regiment/brigade "Blackfish," a battalion H.Q. "Fiddle," a company "Fairy."

No doubt it works all right, but for me it smacks too much of the poetry of Gertrude Stein.

IV
(Interlude)

Guy and Gordon and I lay and warmed our naked bodies on the sand and in the sun. Pleasure it was to let a light soft wind play over us. If we closed our eyes we could imagine ourselves at peace bathing with people we would choose. I couldn't help thinking how good it would be to have her there with me, and how lovely she looked in bathing dress. It was infuriating to be there doing nothing, hungry for her company, bored with myself and other people.

That night there was a bright half-moon and the smell of syringa crept stealthily into my room through the open window. I slept badly. It was unfulfilment and nostalgia and what might have been called calf-love—save that I was no longer a calf.

There was no chance of a return to England, so I jumped eagerly at the next job going, which was five or six miles south of Carentan. It involved advancing with the American infantry, who at that time were but four miles or so south of Carentan.

The fine weather changed to rain the night before I left.

V

I was sitting in the yard of a rather ruined farmhouse level with the American artillery. With me I had brought Bernard, a South African marine officer, and some of his braves. The Americans were said at that time to be advancing southwards from Carentan. I had reported to corps H.Q. I was about to report to divisional H.Q. but wasn't hurrying because the advance was pretty slow.

We'd had an early lunch and I was sitting in the jeep, thinking, while the chaps cleaned up inside the farmhouse. Two piglets minced across the farmyard. I smiled as I thought how their rumps wagged like those of fat women in shoes with heels too high for them.

A fine Alsatian pup approached and nosed round me. Ilford came out and proceeded to feed it about three pounds of corned beef. I rebuked

him, and was told, by way of excuse, that he was fond of dogs and kept Alsatians at home.

The rain came steadily down. I shook myself, whistled up Bernard and Ilford, and set off in the jeep to find divisional H.Q. It was a fairly sordid and stricken area, though round the H.Q. it was pretty clean. At the H.Q. I demanded the whereabouts of the G.2 and G.3. Upstairs in his bedroom I found the G.2 in his negligee.

"Come right in," he said. "Just havin' ma foist bath for three weeks."

He poured Bernard and me about two-thirds of a tumblerful of brandy each and listened while I told my story.

We left with a chit from him. We tried to find the regimental (brigade) H.Q. nearest to where we wanted to go. It wasn't easy. When we got there things were closing down so we left and went back to our farmhouse for the night.

By this time the marines had more or less cleared the main living-room of the house and we were able to light the fire. On the mantelshelf I found a clip of wooden bullets left by some earlier (German) occupants. They're a filthy weapon which can be used at a range of not more than 200 yards or so. (Next day I saw an American soldier's upper arm with a hole in it you could put your fist into and yet the bone was intact still. If it had been a steel bullet the bone might have been broken; but the wound would have healed more easily.)

Early next morning, after a good night's sleep, we breakfasted to the sound of heavy gunfire all round us. There was a battery of 155's just behind us and some 105's three hundred yards away to the west. As they cooked the chaps sang *Lili Marlene*, a tune I can never hear, to this day, without thinking of the sullen ugliness of that ruined farmhouse and the smell of coffee and frying bacon, and the sound of the rain beating on the board we had put over the window.

As we were finishing, a swarthy, shifty-eyed Frenchman came in, followed by his blowsy wife. Without a word they passed through the room and upstairs. I followed them and found them rifling the disordered bedrooms. For a moment I thought they were the owners; but then discovered that they were hinds employed by the owners and sent them packing, in short order, as looters. The upstairs part of the house was a pretty nasty sight. What shellfire hadn't damaged the infantry had. It depressed me.

I went out to find a quiet place, with a few pages of a naval signal pad in my hand, and found traces of what must have been quite a nasty little scuffle. In all that rather desolate spot I think the most desolate thing was a shattered rifle.

A shattered gun or other weapon is always, to me, a kind of unpleasant incongruity. For a weapon is essentially a thing hard, unbreakable, offensive. A rifle, in particular, is the lowest common denominator of war, the man's personal weapon. In its ready-for-use state it has a

certain meretricious beauty, deriving from its utility and hardiness. Broken, it is obscene.

If an inanimate object, made for war, can thus be reduced to ill-favoured uselessness, it does not bear thinking of what the same forces can do to a man.

When I went to collect my jeep from among the transport, parked under the trees in a neighbouring field, I had a bit of a shock. Seeing cows grazing in the field the evening before and some of them lying down, I had deduced that there were no mines. On closer examination, however, the cows lying down were seen to be dead and lacking in forelegs from having trodden on mines. I breathed more freely when we had got the transport out of that field and into a safer place.

Leaving Bernard to get rations, I went up again to the regimental command post (or brigade H.Q.), which was in a farm about half a mile from the forward troops. The air quivered with gunfire and was hideous with the stench of dead. As I arrived in the office the colonel was addressing a few words to a wretched little G.I., a kid of about 20, who was sitting in the doorway, holding like grim death on to his rifle and shivering.

"Put that muckin' rifle away, and forget you ever had it," said the colonel, "and take this message to Lootenant Smith."

He then turned a fiercely suspicious glance on me,—he later admitted that it was because I was wearing a naval cap and not a steel helmet. He calmed down when I waved my credentials at him and was very courteous.

I waited a while, listening to the battle reports coming in from battalion and company H.Q.'s on the telephone, and following them on the map. Movement was slow; the place I wanted to examine was not likely to be reached for two or three hours at least, and there were still many German pockets to be cleaned up. The Germans in this sector were a tough lot of S.S. characters and were showing reluctance to surrender.

I went out to the jeep and told Ilford and the driver that they'd have to wait a bit. Ilford cocked his head a little, and the driver, Williamson, said in a slow hoarse whisper which he fondly imagined could only be heard by me:

"They moosta coom oop against a coouple of snipers, sir, to joodge from all this racket."

Back in the H.Q. I waited, had lunch and waited again. By four o'clock it was obvious that I shouldn't be able to do my job that day, so I left it till next day. There were about 25 panzers in hull-down positions holding up the advance, and it would need more artillery and even dive-bombers to clear them out. There were also a couple of 88 millimetre batteries causing trouble.

Next morning Bernard and I went up again with two of the hands

to the regimental headquarters. The situation was improving and we got ready to go forward.

While I was talking to the colonel, a general came in. "Who's this man?" he asked, pointing at me.

On being told, he shook me warmly by the hand and said he was glad to have me there, and I was to do as I liked. Which was a considerably more civil gesture than I was expecting.

I said we were going up forward, and he replied:

"Take care of that road-bend," pointing at the map. "I spent the last half-hour in a ditch there dodging German shells."

When Bernard and I got down to that point we saw a lot of soldiers crouching behind a bank, so we got out of the jeep and left her behind an extremely disused Tiger tank. The last bit we would have to do on foot.

At battalion command post the colonel gave us the green light but told us to go careful as the German pockets were only half mopped up, and besides, he said, "Jerry is bein' a bit rugged with his guns just hereabouts."

We walked on at 10-yard intervals from each other, and eventually found a company post from which seven or eight 6-foot lumps of master-race were being led away as prisoners. They were sweating and had excited eyes.

From this command post I was led up forward to where I had to go. There was nothing for me there, as I'd half expected. But from the spirited defence the Germans had put up there might well have been. There were many dead from both sides, but the Americans who survived were feeling battle-worthy and proud. They had been, they said, so gahdam green when they landed.

I had a snack with the captain at the command post and picked my way back to the jeep leaving the rattle of Spandau and tommy-gun behind me. At the battalion command post I called for Bernard. As if there wasn't enough war going on, two cockerels were opening up hostilities, glaring at each other over beaks that almost touched and nodding their heads up and down. "Probing the enemy defences," I think it's called by the newshawks.

The last three or four hundred yards were the worst. It was as well we had left the jeep behind that tank. Just as we turned out of the farmyard on to the road, and were spreading out, I heard a scream rather like a motor-car engine racing and yelled Down! For myself I got into the quickest horizontal glide I'd done for a long time, banking steeply so as to land in a shallow ditch at the roadside. Two 88 millimetre shells landed about 20 yards ahead of us then three more over the hedge, one of them setting on fire a jeep just over the other side of the hedge from us. One-two-three salvos with five seconds between them by my watch. So I told Bernard and the two hands to stand by to run as soon

as the last of each salvo had landed and flop down as soon as the scream of the next one came.

So, by degrees, we got back to the jeep in about $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours. (I mean that; it was two and a half hours to me, though only $2\frac{1}{2}$ minutes to my watch. That's an odd trick time has of expanding and contracting. Watches and clocks have no idea of reality.)

On one of my flops I was almost sick, for I had landed in my indecent haste on top of a dead American whose blood still flowed.

Back at the jeep I noted how well the Red Cross teams were working, and how calmly, compared with the ordinary soldiers (and with myself).

I noted, too, that although I could really have run the distance without being out of breath (I was pretty fit at the time), I was gasping like an octogenarian after getting to the upper reading room at his club.

Still, when I gave Bernard a cigarette I observed smugly that his hands were shaking more than mine.

A hundred yards away an anti-tank gun had been caught on the road, with its crew, by the first burst. It was now lying on its back, a smouldering wreck, and the crew were no longer alive.

Death in action is lauded and bedizened in glory—perhaps for the benefit of the bereaved—but in its physical presence it is without dignity, without pathos—as witness the senseless and unstudied attitudes of dead men on a battlefield.

It is not that a man does not expect death when he goes into action. You have only to see the look in men's eyes before action to realise that that is untrue. But everyone who enters a battle tells himself unconsciously, "It can't happen to me. It can't happen to me." It is therefore a surprise when it comes, like a gate-crasher to a not very pleasant party. This, I imagine, accounts for the positions of dead men in the field.

Or am I talking sententious nonsense?

Better than what I am saying is Raleigh:

"O eloquent, just, and mighty Death, what none has dared, thou hast done. . . . Thou hast drawn together . . . all the pride, cruelty and ambition of man, and covered it up with these two narrow words: HIC JACET." And yet; better to glorify it, better to deck it in sombre majesty however pinchbeck. The other, though truer, is too bitter a point of view and too painful. It can happen to you, too, and you are too important to yourself for the thought of being another "stiff," another helpless, inanimate corpse, to be a pleasant one.

I was not really sorry to leave that part of the world. One stands these things quite well, but when it is serving no purpose, why do it?

"Well," said Roger, a little unsympathetically, when I'd finished telling him all about the trip, "That'll teach *you* to snore in church, anyway."

He had all the gallows-buttons of his trousers broken in the ensuing onslaught.

CHAPTER NINE

I

AFTER my scuffle with Roger, and when the others had turned in, I found sleep difficult, so I put on boots, trousers and a pullover, and walked a little in the grounds of the house. Coming back, I rooted round by candlelight until I found something to read. It was, I think, the *New Statesman*. In one of the weekly chit-chat columns by Sarcophagus, or whatever it is he calls himself, I found a story quoted, which bore most strangely close on my thoughts:

“A certain merchant of Damascus was sitting, one evening, in his house, when his favourite servant came to him in a great turmoil of spirits, and said:

“‘Master, lend me a horse, that I may ride away from Damascus this night to Samara. For I have just seen the figure of Death in the market-place, and he beckoned to me; so that I fear to meet him again.’ The merchant accordingly lent the horse, and then went forth to the market-place himself; where he, too, saw the figure of Death. To whom he said: ‘Why did you frighten my good servant to-day?’

“‘I did not mean to,’ answered Death, ‘I merely made a gesture of surprise at seeing him here, for I have an appointment with him, this very night, at Samara.’”

II

We visited the 1st and 3rd Army Headquarters, and understood that it would not be long before the pent-up forces of the beach-head surged through the German lines. (Though a general SITREP made it clear that there was so much weight against Montgomery's two armies that the break was more likely to be in the west than in the east.)

We returned to camp, where new equipment was issued, including new sleeping-bags, with zip-fasteners, which weighed about five pounds and must have cost fifty. Too much ruddy luxury, we growled, but accepted them thankfully.

Hearing some marines in genial converse, I began to believe that it would be good for us to leave Carteret before the French inhabitants came to understand the British soldier's only adjective. But I think they must, after a two or three weeks' course, begin to realise that it is a swearword, and not an operational pause in conversation such as—“er”—or—“mmmm—.”

Roger had been in England for three or four days, when, on July 25th, Gordon said quietly to me one evening:

"Ah'm thinkin' ye'd better go back to U.K. with the swag, Peter, before it's too late."

I was glad in one way; sorry in another. I was afraid I'd miss the break-through, and yet I knew that once that break-through happened I might not be able to return for months. And I was desperately keen to see her again.

I slept badly that night, from excitement.

Next day I set off, with Marine MacDonald driving, in an aged Peugeot built by the French for the Germans.

We chugged laboriously along to Bayeux, where we stopped for lunch in the approved service car park. Eating next door to us were three braw Scots from the 51st Division. MacDonald at once struck up clannish relations with them.

"Wha' aboot this Monty?" he asked.

"Och, he's a _____," they replied, and went on to say how unfair it was that the 50th and 51st Divisions, and the 7th Armoured Division should have been dragged into this invasion nonsense just because Monty was used to them and knew he could rely on them. There were, they said, twice as many other divisions, just as good, whom he could have used. It was obscene, they said. It was unprintable.

Yet in a way, you could see they were flattered, for all their grousing. Though, God knows, there can't be many men of the original 50th and 51st and 7th Armoured Divisions who have come through unscathed; and it is no sort of fun having casualties.

We got to Courseulles about tea-time, and, over a cup of tea, fixed ourselves for the next L.S.T. going over. I had to report at a transit camp next morning with papers and things, and await Movement Control's orders. It seemed that officialdom and spurious efficiency and red-tape were reaching their dead fingers over the Channel to fasten on our freer way of life.

I turned in early in one of the offices of F.O.B.A.A.'s staff, a vast room occupying the entire top floor of an ancient French farmhouse. At about 1030 the rightful occupants came in and began to fry mushrooms. So I awoke and took nourishment with them. (I had no excuse, as I'd already had dinner, and various acquaintances from former days now on F.O.B.A.A.'s staff had kindly lashed me up with their severely rationed gin.)

In the morning I was up early and off with MacDonald in the Old-World Peugeot, to the transit camp. The Old-World Peugeot was an odd-looking object about 12 feet high, which made loud and almost human protests as she breasted any of the minor Normandy slopes. She caused a lot of derisive comment, and one could see the soldiers' lips

shaping the words: "Cor, stone me," as we sailed serenely past at a nerve-shattering 15 m.p.h.

MacDonald drove the old cow as if she were a tank.

We reported at the transit camp, whose entrance was guarded by the lonely grave of a German soldier, whose name, according to the bare little wooden cross at its head, was Willi Schroeder, killed in action, 7th June, 1944.

We obtained some indifferent tea from an ex-guardsman with the flattest feet I have ever seen.

The hours dragged slowly past. I talked to my fellow-travellers, a bomb-happy lad from the 8th Armoured Division (who introduced whisky into the conversation at 1100 hours British Double Summer time), various other odd pongos, and a brace of sub-lieutenants R.N.V.R. going back for courses.

We had lunch, and about half the officer strength of the Canadian Army invaded the camp.

I decided there was no future in this transit camp nonsense, and returned to F.O.B.A.A., where Brian arranged, very kindly, for me to go on board the first L.S.T. to beach that afternoon. He also produced Calvados, and gave me a cheese to take back to his fiancee.

At about five o'clock I went to Juno beach. Three L.S.T. were just drying out. They would unload and then I'd go on board.

It was Thursday, and I had to be back by Saturday, or I should miss her. For I had only until Monday in England.

Finally, I got on board as it was growing dark. There were many seriously wounded men, lying in the tank deck, each in his own private world governed by pain, each spiritually independent of the rest of us yet physically dependent on the sick bay chaps who handled them with a mixture of gruff tenderness and brisk impersonal slickness.

(Curious, I remember thinking, the look that comes in a man's eyes when he sees a wounded man. What is it? It is less than sympathy, and more than "There, but for the grace of God, go I.")

The tide rose slowly.

We gnaw the nail of hurry, master, away!

At length we were in Cowes roads, and, at long last, alongside the South Railway jetty. I couldn't go ashore, but we saw the wounded being taken off, each one being greeted by one of a party of extremely attractive Wrens, who were seized and taken below by a very enterprising sub R.N.V.R. after their humanitarian duties were ended.

At 0600 next morning (it was Saturday by now), MacDonald and I drove ashore at Gosport Hard. The wretched Peugeot got her engine swamped and stuck mulishly half aboard, half ashore. She was towed out of the way by a bulldozer. R.E.M.E. fixed her up $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours later, and we forged towards the Gosport ferry; which, dammit, had just left because we took an hour to find it. By this time the port after wheel

of the Peugeot was unscrewing itself every 200 yards and had to be screwed up either by me or a sweating and cursing MacDonald. We had missed breakfast on board, and there was none to be had ashore. But MacDonald had been to Gosport before, and, in his direct and Neanderthal way, remembered a pub which opened at 1000 on Saturday. So we each had two double whiskies and two pints as chasers and felt stronger.

We remounted the good steed, and, driving her to H.M.S. *Vernon*, left her, much against the will of an aged and protesting torpedo gunner's mate.

Finally, we reached London at five in the afternoon, dirty, fed-up, and slightly bored with the war.

I got MacDonald a leave warrant, and he departed for Auchtermuchty via Euston. The imagination boggles rather at how he spent his leave.

Feverishly I rang up her number at the Air Ministry. By some unusual chance she had changed her day off that week, and was there.

CHAPTER TEN

I

IT was while I was at home this time that news began to come through of an advance by the U.S. 3rd Army through Coutances towards Granville and Avranches; and as those broad and rather nebulous arrows that appear on maps in newspapers began to jut southwards in the Cotentin peninsula I became uneasy and hastened my return to France.

I left Portsmouth on a grey, choppy morning, in an M.L. with four pongo officers and a green-stripe sub R.N.V.R. All I can remember about the drive from London to Portsmouth is a mixture of misery at leaving her, relief at leaving flying-bombs, and a kind of pricking, elephant-child curiosity as to what would happen to me before I next saw England again. I can also recall, rather dimly, contrasting the relative speed and comfort of road travel in England as compared with its counterpart in France. In Normandy you could either have fine weather and dust, or wet weather and mud. You paid your money and you took your choice. . . .

As we left harbour, I went on deck to take a last look at England. Spithead was roughish; and the Channel would be rougher still.

As we passed the Nab a squall sprang up and the M.L. began to roll about 30° each way. The pongos all assumed a horizontal position and an expression of pinched distaste. The sub took on a colour like the stripe on his sleeve, and, handing me some obviously unwanted sandwiches, disappeared into the heads.

I took the sandwiches on deck and ate them. The squall was succeeded by a bright period. About 50 Liberators passed us, far overhead, so far that they seemed almost to stand still while we moved. In their silver summer suits, they were very ghostlike, rather like Flying Dutchmen, I thought tritely.

We passed two great convoys, one going north, the other south.

Far away, and fine on our port bow, a R.A.F. air/sea rescue craft bounced about. . . .

At Arromanches I found my transport, a jeep, and set off for Carteret.

On the way some masochistic impulse made me look, from time to time, at my watch, and say to myself:

“This time yesterday I was waiting for her to arrive. . . .”

“This time yesterday, she said. . . .”

“This time yesterday we were dancing a Viennese waltz. . . .”

And even a London taxi is more comfortable than a jeep—and more pleasant, if you choose your company.

We were held up, at dusk, by a stream of about 350 trucks, who, as priority vehicles, prevented our using the road. They were dashing south-eastwards, driven by lackadaisical coons. It was therefore half-past midnight when we arrived, and everyone else was in bed.

I found some bread and cheese, and very stale coffee, and, as I ate, I read by candlelight, a publication calling itself *New Writing*, or something.

New Writing apparently consists of:

(a) a story in Irish dialect about a youth going mad, and of how his mavourneen went to bed with him to occupy his time till the asylum sent for him

(b) a story about an aged harridan pinching things from Woolworth's in order to sell them and gain a shilling to put on the 3.30.

(c) about 20 other stories in similar vein and style

(d) also some verse, of which the following serve as example:

"Time, like a crumpled piece of tin
Lies unexpressive on the ice
of Faith, that drugg'd and blind
Trollop. . . ."

(Shades of G. K. Chesterton, who apostrophised the modern poet thus:

"I am sorry
If you have a green pain
Gnawing your brain
Away.

I suppose quite a lot of it is gnawed away by this time.")

And so to bed, in disgust. It was August 1st, and the U.S. 3rd Army were bursting through at Avranches. News was curiously sparse and uninformative, but you could feel the surge forward going on.

II

Next morning, the radio announced the impending fall of St. Malo. A little sceptical about this, we made preparations to leave for Brittany by way of Avranches that evening, assuming, quite rightly, that the port would be a tough problem for the attackers. (It took 18 days, after the announcement of its imminent fall, to reduce the place. And I mean reduce.)

At lunch time, Gordon produced some Polish vodka of which, it being a colourless, odourless, and apparently pointless fluid, I took about half a glass more than comes up to my Plimsoll line. Peter Scott, the duck-

painter, came to call on us after lunch, and asked to be taken down the coast to Granville, for some official purpose or other. Having nothing to do, I volunteered to conduct him, and we set off through Lessay and found, after some endeavour, a coastal road.

Many of the places we visited had hardly glimpsed any allied troops, Monmartin, Arnoville, Bricqueville . . . and so on, and it was grand to see the slow smile spreading over people's faces as we passed. But what the newspaper types would call—and rightly—a poignant sight, was the all-too-frequent little groups and families moving northward towards ruined Lessay, with their oxen and their children, and all their little world of belongings strapped on to carts. We knew, as they probably did not, that they would be lucky if they found any home, however empty, left standing for them in Lessay.

It was a relief, after Lessay and La Haye du Puit, to see Coutances only partly damaged, and its lovely cathedral on the perimeter still reaching finely to the sky, and to find that Granville was nearly undamaged, though its port installations had been pretty thoroughly demolished.

On the way back, partly from too much sun, partly from too much of Gordon's blasted Polish vodka, and partly, perhaps, from excitement, my inside began to play hell with me, and I was afraid I would be sick any moment. On our return, the Quack, seeing my pallid expression, felt my pulse, and tapped my chest and sent me to bed, with orders not to start with the main party at 2200, but to wait and go with Roger at 0700 next morning.

I lay and shivered in the sleeping bag and heard the noises of the night caravan as it got ready to go: and said many unprintable things about Polish vodka—and the sun.

At 0700, Roger and I were under way. There was a mist over the little bay at Carteret, and the sun was just beginning to shine through. I said good-bye to the place with unmixed relief.

We trekked over to U.S. 1st Army, and then to 3rd Army. At the latter we met the naval liaison officer.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "I know you fellers have directives signed by General Eisenhower, Winston S. Churchill, etcetera. But, believe me, feller, it don't matter if you have a directive signed by J. C. It's got to clear through this H.Q. before you get any sense out of Corps, or Division'll leave you behind the eight-ball line" (or sump'n).

He went on to tell us of a certain U.S. naval officer (who, as a matter of fact, had bet us he'd be in St. Malo before us) who, that very afternoon, had been caught by German anti-tank guns outside Dol de Bretagne on the St. Malo road. He had been killed with all but two of his staff. It shook us a bit. We'd known him rather well.

First Army H.Q. was at that time in a chateau which had, for two days, housed Rommel's H.Q. He had, I believe, to move his H.Q.

every two days, in order to avoid the attentions of the Air Forces. Which is no mean job. An army or army group H.Q. takes some shifting.

We left and drove on through Avranches and Pont Aubault. The rapidity of the advance was shown by the numbers of dead men, mostly Germans, who were still lying around, five days after they had been killed, and by some lorries, just behind Avranches, which were still smoking.

As we rounded the curve at Pont Aubault we saw Mont St. Michel shining in the sun, over the mist, perhaps 12 miles away. We eventually caught up with Guy, and Philip (the marine troop commander—for we had now only one troop with us and its C.O., and had shaken off the noisome H.Q. party) on the road just due north of Mont St. Michel, and bivouacked with them in some slit trenches in an orchard, conveniently evacuated that morning by the American Armoured Division which was now farther west.

On the radio that evening we heard that Stimson had announced the fall of Rennes. As 3rd Army had no idea, that afternoon, as to when Rennes would fall, it can only be supposed that Stimson was announcing the phase lines of the battle and assuming they were fact. Roger decided that if Derek and I and Philip and his troop arrived at Rennes the following afternoon, we could either join in the attack, or, if there was no need for an attack, could enter with the forward troops. So we went to bed.

Just as I was posting the guard, a low-flying aircraft came over. A light *ack-ack* party in the next field opened up, and received some cannon-fire in exchange. I don't know whether it was a German or an Allied plane. If the latter, its crew were probably quite in the dark as to where the Germans were. So were we. It was a kind of no-man's-land. The late Matthew Arnold wrote once of "ignorant armies fighting by night." He wasn't far wrong, except that he'd not heard of the heavier-than-air machine.

There were other alarms and excursions, including a herd of cattle who loomed up suspiciously in the mist and nearly got shot up. When I inspected the sentries at 0300, there was a moon leering rather doubtfully through the mist, as if uncertain of its reception.

My slit trench was about six inches too narrow, and therefore uncomfortable. But Roger and Guy were even worse off. When they awoke in the morning, they had little frogs leaping gaily all over their faces.

In the morning, I set to and widened my trench, in case we had to spend another night in the orchard, while Roger went off to Army for news of Rennes. Guy also widened his.

Then we lay in the shade of an apple tree, content to be off on the road again; and talked of nothing much in a lazy, relaxed way. It was most pleasant.

We needn't have troubled to widen the trenches. Roger came back at the double, and Derek and Philip and I hustled through lunch, and set off for Rennes, turning off the westward road at Pontorson, and rushing south through Autrain, and St. Aubin d'Aubigny. Charles, who'd been sent to get in touch with Division, had reported the place free, and sent back a D/R who met us on the road with the news.

III

I do not know the exact distance from where we bivouacked to Rennes, but believe it to have been about fifty miles. We took it at about forty-five or more all the way; and there were 10 trucks in our convoy. Derek, who was leading, would signal us to speed up from time to time, by the approved method of raising and lowering his arm; "Little Roger," a marine captain from another unit, who had been attached to us for a certain purpose, and was next in the line, would pass it to me, and I to the truck behind, and so on. Messages for which there was no adequate single signal, we would pass by semaphore; e.g. "Keep your Bren-gunner's head down," and "Look out, more Yank tanks." Other and ruder signs and signals were also made.

We passed in succession more than three miles of deserted road, then two or three little towns gay with bunting, whose inhabitants screamed and clapped their hands at us, and then we had to overtake about fifty American trucks on hairpin bends winding tiresomely up a low ridge of hills, and then more deserted stretches, and more hills, and more little towns. It was hot and sunny, and unbelievably dusty. Every now and then there would be the reeking signs of a recent small engagement, a smoking and abandoned tank, an upturned German gun, a corpse or two.

A French liaison officer in my scout car perspired freely, and winced as we passed each convoy. I heard him mutter something about "*Ces diables aux berets verts.*"

During the final few miles Derek took it into his head to wave encouragement with a captured fencing-foil. It was an exhilarating but slightly crazy afternoon.

Rennes is not, to my mind, a very nice town, and the hot, dusty afternoon, and the yelling crowds in the streets made me think of it as resembling a bull-ring. I remember, too, that the people shouted, not "*Vivent les Alliés*," not "*Vive l'Angleterre*," not "*Vive l'Amérique*," nor even "*Vive la France*," but "*Vive la Résistance*." Why this should have seemed incongruous I do not know, but it did.

We entered the large square, and saw there a mob of about 3,000 who were jeering and hooting in the wake of two French Resistance men. Between these two was a figure barely recognisable as a woman, shorn,

tarred and feathered, and bleeding. "*Madame Boche*," the crowd screamed, "*Madame Boche*," and shook their fists.

For the second time since coming to France, I found the finger-nails digging into the palms of my hands. (The first was on seeing Caen.) Why this should have affected me so I do not know. Even at the time I reminded myself that the woman had almost certainly slept with one or more Germans, had probably strutted through the town, had obtained extra rations, and might even have betrayed her fellow-countrymen and had them shot.

And yet—it was an ugly savage sight, and I hated it. (It is one of the troublesome results of being a former public schoolboy I suppose.) These kaleidoscopic pieces of macabre ferocity, almost like some of Goya's pictures of the Spanish wars, were pretty frequent sights during the next few weeks. I became inured after a while.

At the time I told myself that they were a part of the agony of the rebirth of France, and that I made a very bad midwife.

We took over the large Lycée des Garçons which, three or four days before, the Germans had been using as a main Luftwaffe Operations H.Q. It was an enormous place, four storeys high and with several courtyards. There was food for about 2,000 people there, and a very adequate cellar, over which we placed a guard, and, in addition to all the dozens of offices, and sleeping quarters and canteens and messes above ground, a great underground operations room, with a plotting-table and a large telephone exchange.

In a dungeon under one of the blocks, some living thing, either human or animal, had died a day or two before; I didn't go and find out which.

Derek and Philip and I and Little Roger had a scratch meal at seven and then dashed about 15 miles southwards from Rennes to a chateau near the little town of Port Rean, on the road to Redon.

On the outskirts of the town we stopped at a U.S. command post. They were the most forward American troops, they told us, and knew nothing of what lay beyond. We warned them to expect us back at dusk, and not to shoot us up, and then pushed on.

We crossed the aerodrome at St. Jacques, and had to skirt some mines in the road, rather gingerly. It was a little eerie. We streaked along a completely deserted road, stopped rather suspiciously in a village, and asked the only two Frenchmen we met (who, by the way, looked at us with wide, excited eyes, and showed a marked desire to get away from us) where the Germans were. "*Ils sont partout, partout*," they replied, waving their arms.

There were woods bordering the road, so we took it to mean that the Germans were in hiding there. We were right.

We set the jaw, and drove on, a mile, two miles, three, four, along a road under observation from a height beyond. A well-placed 88-milli-

metre gun on that height could have given us our quietus. But there was none there.

Suddenly, we entered the village of Port Réan, and the tension slipped from us. Flags suddenly appeared and flowers were cast at us. The people danced out to meet us, to cheer, and slow our progress, and kiss us. They had waited four years to see us, they said, US.

We looked at the Chateau. The German field kitchens were still alight, in the grounds, and a few French looters said that the master-race had fled precipitately four hours before we arrived.

Derek, motivated, I suppose, by a whim which often besets him, that of being in a position where he is really scared, elected to stay the night at the chateau, with Little Roger. Philip and I left him, just in time to cross the aerodrome and re-enter the American lines as dark fell. Fortunately, we were not shot at by our allies.

We were dog tired when we turned in, and I didn't notice the broken glass on the floor of my room, or the photograph of a singularly revolting German *mädel* over my bed. Heigho. The next day the guard said there had been an air raid, and a lot of discharge of musketry by slightly inebriated Americans in the streets. I didn't hear it.

IV

When Derek returned in the morning, Little Roger told me in an aside, that they really had been scared, as the Germans had been moving stealthily past them in little groups all night. So Derek had his money's worth.

I rooted around the Lycée des Garçons during the day, and found, among other things, the *Feldpost*, with thousands of unposted and unsorted letters in it. One of the letters, opened at random, and dated July 28th, said with unconscious irony :

"My dear Putschi,

So the Invasion has happened. But don't worry. Here I sit, far from the fighting. . . ."

Philip sent for me to help him. Madame from a nearby brothel had come to call, a not ill-favoured woman of forty-odd, somewhat *embonpoint*. She explained that her establishment had been commandeered by the Germans, and that she felt that the least she could do was to offer two free evenings to the Allies. We thanked her profusely but said, rather prudishly, though quite truthfully, that we should not be staying long enough to take advantage of her kind offer.

A little later, the Resistance brought us two more women with their

heads shorn. They wanted to remove their finger-nails in front of us, but we wouldn't let them.

Little Roger and I, going round a Todt Organisation camp called the Verdun Lager, found two disconsolate little Russian boys, one seventeen, the other fifteen. They had eaten nothing for two days. They pathetically showed us their identity cards. Both had had to wear chains round their necks with large iron weights attached, on which were stamped their numbers. They had been in the Todt Organisation for three years, so one had begun at 14 and the other at 12 years old.

Nice people, the Germans, we thought. The French looked after the little Russians quite kindly.

MacBride (Derek's servant) and Ilford announced that they had become "Oppos." I was glad, for MacBride was a good lad, and I stood to gain from the deal. For there is practically nothing that a sailor or a marine will not do for his oppo—more commonly called his "flickinoppo."

And that was Rennes. Roger (Big Chief Roger) arrived that evening. He told us that, according to the phase lines, American armour should be entering Brest next day, and we must chase to catch it up. He asked me to get the troops fallen in next morning so that he could tell them what was going on. We would start at 0930, he said, and drive westwards as far as we could, he and I and Derek and Philip, and a troop of marines.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

WE had stowed our gear in the vehicles, and the men were fallen in, waiting for Roger to come out and talk to them. About two-thirds of the demi-monde of Rennes was hanging on to the railings chattering the troops, while two seedy little French policemen tried to move them on. A good time was being had by all.

Then Roger appeared, and talked to the chaps, very much as he talked at the concentration cage before D-day. He showed them a map.

"General Patton's army's sweeping through Brittany just now," he said. "There's a division or so at St. Malo, and an armoured division, the 6th, has reached the outskirts of Brest. We are interested in Brest, and we're leaving for there to-day.

"But I must warn you not to expect a picnic. So far only one road to Brest has been used. The others, including the one we are going to travel are unknown quantities. We shall almost certainly meet a lot of Germans. On the other hand, the French Maquis, the Resistance people, have risen, and in some parts they're pretty strong and well-armed and organised. They are our friends, and we shall look to them to tell us when there are more Germans about than we can cope with, the fifty of us. (That'll mean over 250 at a time.)" The men laughed.

"We shall rely principally on lying low and only fighting when we can be sure of winning. But it will be a good party, and you'll all have to be very much on the top-line all the time, and your discipline will have to be extremely good.

"That's all, I think. Oh, yes, there's one other thing. The French and Germans don't get on too well with one another, and you may see some pretty nasty things done by both sides. If you see the Germans doing them, you take action. If you see the French doing them, you can't do anything about it. It's their revenge, and they've a lot to be revengeful about.

"All right. Let's get off now."

It was Route Nationale 164 that we took, according to a Michelin map I possessed (by courtesy of A. Hitler and Co., Ltd.) At the perimeter of Rennes, we waved good-bye to the forward infantry command post, and lunged out towards the west, by no means certain of what was waiting for us each mile that we passed on. The speed of the convoy was the speed of its slowest vehicle, a Bedford 15 cwt., which had developed a nasty hacking cough somewhere in its tiresome interior. So we couldn't do more than about 25 m.p.h.

Warning Ilford in the Bren turret of the scout car to keep a good look-out in any close country, I fell into a brown study.

II

It was odd, in the midst of a fairly active campaign, but I reflected gloomily on Rennes, and its implications. It is a medium-sized French town, and if you had an hour or so to wander round it, and talk to its people, which I did, you could get a glimpse of what the war and its aftermath must be like for people who were in occupied territory.

What happened, and is happening, is something like this.

During the period of numb dismay following the Armistice, the Germans arrive, to be greeted by a hostile anxious people. They are much on their guard, for they know they are not going to be liked. But they are the supermen, the glittering, clattering, conquerors.

It is gradually realised that they are just, though strict, that their men are very correct in their behaviour; and the Germans ensure that this impression has a solid foundation in fact. Memories of British troops, billeted in the town, are compared with the present German reality, sometimes, at least, to our discredit. (Perhaps there have been girls wronged and drunks in the streets while we were there.)

Anyway, gradually there begins to grow up a toleration for the Germans, even among many of those Frenchmen who were ill-disposed towards them. Children find them kindly, and a good source of sweets and toys—for your German is a good family man. (I still remember the confusion caused to a good French family when the little son—aged 4—on being told to go to bed, seized my hand and said, “No, I’m going back to Germany with this officer.”) Young girls at the flapper stage, and even older women are attracted physically by the young, clean-looking soldiers. They succumb. They are well-treated, privileged. And, from the German messes come gifts of food, and wine. They wangle extra rations. If they are with a German officer they get furs, and jewels, or, at the very least, extra clothes.

Many women, older, perhaps, or less attractive in looks, are angry at this, not merely from outraged patriotism, but also—and more probably—because they themselves are not sufficiently fetching to compel such attentions or consideration.

The authorities find it easier to do as they are told, and, little by little, begin to respect the order and method for which Germans the world over are justly famous. Visits are exchanged, and courtesies become less strained, relations less formal.

The wealthier men, particularly, I imagine, the manufacturers in the industrial Northern towns, after an initial period of inanition and slackness, find that it pays them to turn out goods for the Germans. They

do so, comforting themselves, perhaps, with the thought of gain, and quietening their consciences with the belief that it gives employment to the poorer folk, and a way of gaining a living.

In some cases the working people revolt. In a few, the manufacturers refuse to comply with German orders. Then they are in trouble, and their factories are bought up cheaply by less scrupulous rivals.

An army of black marketeers, pimps, cheats, thieves, and other undesirables, forms itself. Women become looser in their affections, and men, too. Morals are at a discount.

As for the police; *ah les flics, les vaches!* *Que voulez-vous?*

So it begins and so it grows.

During four years the nadir of cynicism is reached.

The Germans become part of the everyday scene. Food becomes scarcer, and fuel more and more difficult to obtain. Respectable people lose their self respect in the struggle for commodities and families are split by a hunger for the barest subsistence.

The army of racketeers grows. Everyone, yes, everyone is forced to find a friend who knows another man, who has some connection with a grocery, a dairy, a coal merchant, through whom and from whom a trickle of supplies can be obtained at a ridiculously high price. If you can't afford it, you starve.

Whores and brothel-masters flourish like the green bay tree.

And yet always there are those—and they are not few—who take an active part against the enemy. Yet they can trust no one, and are themselves mistrusted by the great majority, who look on them as makers of trouble between themselves and their German masters.

Children are born, French, and Franco-German. They grow and begin to take notice. It is an odd world.

The food situation grows steadily worse, but the rich and influential are always all right. So are the Mesdames Boche. The poor, never.

An inferior type of German soldier, perhaps satellites like White Russians or Rumanians, or perhaps even of impressed Poles and Czechs, takes the place of the original troops.

The French find the new drafts "*tres méchant*," and many girls and women weep for their young lovers, drafted away to the Russian front, to North Africa, to Italy, never to return. . . .

After four years there is an Allied landing. Frightened Germans, and even more frightened satellites, begin to behave like frightened beasts. There is much insensate brutality on the German side, followed by anonymous reprisal from the French. The majority, who tolerated the Germans and were even content to accept them with only a little incivility before, now begin to hate them. Personal scores are totted up against collaborators, and particularly against collaboratrices. Some of these, if they can, flee the country, either to Germany or to neutral Spain. They are lucky.

Eventually the first Allied troops enter the town. If its citizens are lucky, there will have been no battle. And the new-come conquerors are frenziedly greeted by everyone, including many of the collaborators.

A few women have their hair shorn off, a few men are shot—including some innocents, in both cases, for the *Denuncio* is a recognised weapon of personal spite on the Continent.

Those who suffered for their patriotism during the occupation may receive some recognition, or they may not. More probably not. It is an ungrateful world.

Quite a lot of collaborators will probably arrange to be decorated with the Legion d'Honneur.

There will be bitterness and disappointment. It will be found that the Allies, too, have their human, their all-too-human failings.

This will have happened throughout the country, in the more densely populated districts. And everywhere, the upward surge of emotion at the liberation will only be, so to speak, the hysterical joy of a patient who learns from his doctor that he is going to recover. The powers of recovery are small and it will be a long struggle. There will be many blighted hopes, and a long, wearisome convalescence. And, furthermore, the doctor, though good at diagnosis and full of bluff, bedside manner, has too little experience of the disease to be much use to a patient as sick as this. . . .

A few months, a year or two will pass, and the Allied troops and the Germans and everybody else will be a memory almost as distant as the Grande Armée of Napoleon.

All that has happened will be dismissed with a shrug of the shoulders, and life will become normal again; the most living memory will be Pierre, who went to Germany as a prisoner of war and died there, of Grand'mère who died of cold and malnutrition, and of little Jeannette who was always ailing and who caught consumption in 1941.

This will have happened all over Europe, in France, Belgium, Holland, Poland, Norway, Denmark, Yugo-Slavia and Greece. It may or may not be accompanied by political disturbances. (Some people get a rash when ill, some do not.)

It will form the stuff from which will be woven many a dreary best-seller, in many a language, for many a year.

III

But rumination on the road from Rennes was interrupted by a more present consciousness. And, anyway, all the while I didn't feel that I'd really done justice to the French in my thoughts. They are certainly better than that.

We did about a hundred miles from Rennes—or so it seemed, and

most of the way it didn't look as if anyone else had passed that way before us. Most of the way it was we who were the liberators, and to us that people lifted their hands in joy for the first time in years. We drove on under an August sky, in clouds of dust, through a countryside lovelier than could ever be described. It seemed as though the very trees and hedges had drunk at the same heady cup as the people who danced out to meet us.

It was Sunday and all were in their best clothes, the girls unbelievably lovely, the older women benignant and dignified, with their faces framed in the enchanting butterfly lace caps that Breton women wear, and the men lithe, wiry, fair or vividly dark, and active—as befits good Bretons.

There was music in the very names of the towns we passed; Montfort, St. Méen, Merdrignac, Loudéac, St. Caradoc, Rostrenon.

I was moved by this more strongly than by any name since I first went to Wales 10 years before and was greeted by the ringing sound of Cerrig y Druidion, which echoes down the ages from the Celts and the Romans.

We saw no other troops, except for an occasional one or two airborne, standing, mingling in the thronged village crowds; and except for an occasional trace of the passage of the armoured division—K ration boxes and the like strewn at the roadside during a halt—there was no sign that any Allied troops had been there before.

Five miles short of Carhaix we were stopped by the frantic waving of some Maquis, in red scarves. We pulled up. There was an urgency in their gestures which caught us. It was as well it did.

The first person they approached was myself. Roger had overshot them, and was about 50 yards ahead.

"G.2 Division, G.2 Division," they said. I didn't understand. I thought they were saying:

"*J'y tout d' . . . something.*"

Then it dawned on me. It was the Maquis password.

So I asked them what was up. They explained. At Carhaix there were about 3,000 Germans, said to be from the S.S. Crete Parachute Regiment. They had shot up an American supply column earlier in the day, and stolen the supplies and killed the drivers.

I told Roger. As it was then about 1800, we debated the question of going any farther. The Maquis didn't guarantee the roads by night. We picked up the news in the W/T van. Brest had not yet been entered. If it were entered next day we could still make it in reasonable time. The sensible thing to do was to bivouac the main body where we stood, and send feelers out to make contact with the Maquis chiefs.

As we stood deciding what to do, a kind of panic came over the villagers and they rushed for their houses. (Presumably they had part heard our conversation with the Resistance men, and misinterpreted it.) As they hurried past, an old woman said to me:

"The Germans are coming back, they are only 5 kilometres away."

"Oh!" I said, putting on what I fondly hoped was the expression of one who was gladly prepared to die where he stood, and patting my colt automatic.

Roger called over to me and Philip to find a suitable camp site, preferably near water. He then sent Derek and Little Roger off in a jeep and a scout car with a Maquis guide, to find the Maquis H.Q. down near Chateauneuf-du-Faon.

Philip and I soon found a good site, about half a mile back, on the blind side of a crest from which we could watch the road, and the surrounding country, and ourselves remain concealed. About four hundred yards away, down hill, was a canal, in which we could bathe.

A little farm stood nearby, owned by a bed-ridden man and his wife, about 40, with a nice, russet-coloured, worried face, whose two sons were in the Maquis.

We parked the vehicles and camouflaged them, leaving them so that they could be driven out, in a hurry, on to the road again.

I overheard a small bunch of marines sucking their teeth at what they considered a retreat in face of the enemy, and talking much too large about what they'd do to the flicking Germans, and why didn't we go straight on.

So I ticked them off, and shamed them by making them feel, quite rightly, that they were too grassy-green to know what they were talking about. Roger later spoke to them all, and told them not to worry. They'd see plenty later on.

Philip left to look up another Maquis chief nearby. Roger and I went down to wash in the canal before supper, and returned, after our bathe, feeling fresh and pleasantly strung up.

We were faintly amused at being a pocket of resistance in a country still nominally held by the Germans, and faintly scared, too.

Just before dark, Philip returned, having arranged with the Maquis to pass us round Carhaix next morning. With him came the schoolmaster and his wife from Carhaix. These two had crawled out of the town on their stomachs that afternoon to bring news. They estimated that there were 4,000 to 5,000 Germans in the town, mostly bloodthirsty youngsters of 20-odd, and confirmed that they belonged to the Crete S.S. Parachute Division.

A group of young *patriotes* crowded in to meet us. (Male and female created He them). They brought brandy, and offered it to us. I kept a watchful eye on the troops, and only one, the S.B.A. with a squint, exceeded. The *patriotes* became very thoroughly and constructively drunk, partly, they explained, from joy that we were here. They apologised, swaying slightly. But to-morrow, they said, we should see. To-morrow they would take up their arms and kill more of THEM.

We were their comrades, they said, we English. We were of the same race. (Yo-ho-ho!)

I got them out by nightfall, though two of them had to be held up till they were on the road. I fancy they spent the night, bottle in hand, on the roadside.

By 11.30, Roger and I began to worry about Derek and Little Roger. They had been gone 5 hours, and it was no place to go wandering about at night.

A little before midnight there were sounds of vehicles mounting the crest, and Derek and Little Roger came in, tired and rather on edge.

IV

We got them food and wine, but it had to be cold as all the fires were, naturally, dowsed; and then retreated to the barn, where Derek told us all he had been able to gather about German dispositions, and we plotted them on a map, in the light from our shaded torches.

Little Roger then told me about his trip, which had been amusing enough.

They had passed through Gourin, which the Germans were no longer interested in, swooping down on a solitary German soldier in the main street and taking him along with them as a prisoner. They drove for what seemed many miles, with their Maquis guides, ending up in deeply wooded country and along little-used roads, till they came to what looked like an ordinary farmhouse.

A slot opened in the gate. They were recognised as Allied, and they drove into a farmyard, where a girl was standing, filling a water-bucket at a pump.

Instantly, from all the doors and windows came about forty ferocious-looking young men with bright red or blue scarves about their necks, and arms in their hands.

Derek and Little Roger handed over their prisoner, and they were taken in to see the local chief, an English captain, who, together with his wireless-mechanic sergeant dominated and controlled the Maquis in the area, working in constant touch with London by W/T.

They were invited to dinner, and Little Roger interrogated a couple of prisoners for them, prisoners who were afterwards taken out and shot, and knew all along that they would be.

The Maquis harked back very much to Robin Hood, it seemed. And they were so numerous that you'd never know when you would come across them. In most cases they were controlled by British or American officers; and very effective they were. We were damn glad of them.

We turned in on the ground, and slept pretty well; though a certain amount of disturbance was caused by the moonlit antics of Jeannette de Granville, a minute black kitten belonging to Little Roger, who slept all day inside his battle-dress blouse, and appeared to regard the hours of the middle watch as the appointed time for tomfoolery. Roger and I were sleeping under an apple-tree, and about every five minutes or so Jeanette would claw her way up to a bough hanging over our sleeping forms, and there would be a slight thud and a drowsy curse as a bundle of nerves and a tail landed on one part or another of our anatomy. I eventually caught the little perisher and persuaded her to sleep in my sleeping-bag.

We were all up before dawn, and I went down, as the sun rose, to indulge in the luxury of another bathe in the canal. It was like a Corot picture in half-colours and wreathing streamers of thin mist, and the water was cool and yet warm, and embraced the skin like silk. Some Frenchman knew what he was about when he planted the towpaths with larch and birch and willow. I shall always carry with me the picture of that calm, ripple-less, canal, framed in its fine trees, during the instant of decision before I plunged in from the lock-gate.

A yawning Roger and a gummy-eyed Philip joined me down there. It was the best moment of the day.

As we were dressing I saw a pair of half-amused brown eyes looking at us over the hedge. They belonged to a little girl about eight, who was in charge of the cattle and who had obviously been watching us with an approving eye during our nude ablutions. She talked like a grown-up woman, and had more poise than I would have believed possible. In feature, she reminded one of Princess Elizabeth.

We walked back in silence to the camp, and after breakfast, and saying good-bye to Madame of the farm (with a small tribute of chocolate and coffee and sugar—which was all she would accept) and to the village, set off with a Maquis guide up the road through Mael-Carhaix.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I

We had to go by side-roads most of the time, and by God it was dusty. For many long miles you couldn't see 10 yards ahead, for dust, and the white blistering powder spread all over you and insinuated itself under your goggles and rolled itself into tight gritty balls that made you close your eyes and swear with irritation.

Whenever we got on to the main road we generally found the Maquis lining it, and in two cases we passed, without knowing it, through pitched battles between them and small German bodies trying to cross the road southwards from the Côtes-du-Nord. So it was better to do as we were told by the Maquis and to follow their directions.

Our first guide of the day was a swarthy taciturn chap, in an unspeakable pair of trousers, a battle-dress blouse dyed black, with American corporal's stripes, and an American captain's tin hat. He was a villainous-looking, lantern-jawed creature, always sucking about half-an-inch of dead cigarette-end, and invariably addressing everyone as "tu" or "toi."

Two or three times that day he left us, only to jump out of a hedge at a crossroads several miles farther on and give us directions. I don't know what means he adopted for getting about so rapidly, and am inclined, to this day, to credit him with some mild supernatural power.

What little towns we went through that day, I do not clearly remember, but Lannean and Huelgoat were two of them, and there were many more.

Part of the way we were following the road taken by the American armoured division. So that we were greeted by shouts of "*Vive l'Amerique*," until we tired of the squeak of children's voices saying: "*... ique ... ique ... ique ...*" like a lot of mice.

Whenever we stopped we pointed out that we were not Americans but English; a statement which was invariably greeted by renewed acclamation. (One of the sergeants was so enraged at being continually dubbed an American that he chalked in big letters on the front of his truck:

NOUS SOMMES ANGLAISES

He was rather hurt when I told him he was laying claim to being an English girl.)

At each halt, in village or town, the people would besiege us in our vehicles with bread and cheese and cider, out of the pitiful little store which was all the Germans had left them. They would be almost offended if we refused, however politely.

It was an emotional business, this drive through Brittany. For the Bretons are fine, tough, independent people, and full of pride; and yet they were accepting their liberation at our hands with a spirit of generosity as warming to the heart as it was—to me, at least—unexpected.

I think we were all very conscious of how unique and pleasant a thing it was, and how privileged we were, to ride in triumph through such a Persepolis and to be the darlings of such people.

In retrospect, our presence in Brittany could be said to have had a certain flag-showing value. We were the only British unit there; and it did good to show that others besides the Americans were in on this thing. Though, with our 8 or 10 vehicles we could not compete in impressiveness with the Americans and their great and road-shaking columns.

II

By about four we had reached Pleyber-Christ, about 10 kilometres from Morlaix, on the road and railway to that port.

We took over a farmyard graced until the day before by the presence of the Herrenvolk. There were bodies of German troops to the south, east and west of us, how near I do not know, but not far. Morlaix was still in German hands but a small American force had surrounded the town and were supposed to attack it. Thanks to the Maquis we had avoided tiresome brushes with the Germans—for it was not our duty to invite trouble until actually on the job—and had luckily escaped being fired on by a German battery 2 or 3 miles from one of the roads we travelled.

Pleyber-Christ was just off the main American supply road to the west. It was glad to see us. Roger and I sat or lay in an orchard while a stream of all manner of excited Gallic gentlemen came up to us and said they were of the Resistance and had much pleasure in meeting us. They were poorly armed in this area, for the arms dropped for them had fallen into German hands, and they had had to make do with German hand-grenades, and, later, a few captured German rifles.

Their chief was a former commissioned gunner in the French Navy. He arrived with his uncle, a dear old boy, whose white beard quivered with emotion whenever he saw us. The chief approached us smartly at the double, hotly pursued by his uncle, who appeared to think the double-march was the thing to do.

Whilst the commissioned gunner talked to Roger I chatted to the old boy. He was glad we had come, he said, because things were a bit out of hand. That morning three German prisoners, he said, had been shot by the Resistance, after being made to dig their own graves. And two days before, some twenty odd had been tied together, straw bundles

and faggots fixed to them, petrol poured over them; and they had then been burned alive. That, said the old man, was going too far. Shoot them, yes, for they are but *canaille*, but don't let us have atrocities, he said. He then went on to the subject of German atrocities against the French.

How much of what he said was true, I don't know. But it is known that many atrocities were carried out by the Germans in the last stages of their occupation of the land. And the French, not unnaturally, retaliated. Of that, more anon.

Roger finished talking to the commissioned gunner, so I broke up my party with apparent profuse regret. We picked out good sites for sleeping. Derek went off to see if he could get through to the U.S. armoured division. Little Roger and I, carbine in hand, wandered round the town. In one of the streets there was a mild riot. About half the population were walking along, behind a furtive-looking woman who was carrying a heavy-laden shopping-bag.

“*Vache*,” they screamed. “*Madame Boche*.” They shouted to us to arrest her, the Resistance chaps not being, for some reason, among those present. So we took her in charge, more for her own good than anything else.

The stationmaster, an unstable character, much given to self-dramatisation, I should say, and only about half-there, capered round us.

“*Espion!*” he hissed. “*Au mur! Sans jugement!*” he bellowed. There was a grunt of approval from the crowd. The woman took it very calmly. We waved off the Chef de Gare and conveyed her to the town square where the commissioned gunner took charge.

“Lucky you got her,” he observed. “She's been living with a German N.C.O. these last 18 months, and was no doubt on her way back to him with this food. She would probably have told the Germans of you, and your men, commandant.”

I gave up. I was not in the picture. I couldn't get in the picture. It wasn't my business. Whether the woman was shot or not I don't know. Probably not. But she took it all so calmly, and had such a shifty look that she may well have been guilty.

The Chef de Gare, our current Public Nuisance No. 1, asked us to go to his station. We did, the two of us. With an expression of guile, he explained that he wanted us to speak to a friend of his. He picked up the telephone and asked for a number.

“*Allo, Jean*,” he said. “*IL FAIT BON!*”

(I didn't hear the answer.)

Without a word he handed me the 'phone.

I asked whom I had the honour of addressing.

It was the stationmaster at Morlaix, who also said:

“*IL FAIT BON.*”

I began to wonder what the score was, but replied with moderate urbanity:

“Oui, il fait très chaud, aussi.”

This seemed to enrage the man at the other end.

“Name of a crapulous idiot,” he said. “That’s the password: IL FAIT BON. Now what do you want to know about the Germans in this town? I will tell you all.”

It seemed like a very good game, cowboys and Indians, or something, so I decided to humour him, and asked where the anti-tank guns were. He gave me some long rigmarole.

I thanked him, and said good-night. It didn’t seem to me that there was much future in this. So I shook off our Chef de Gare as well, and went off, quietly humming:

*Il est cocu, le Chef de Gare.
Il est cocu, le Chef de Gare.
S'il est cocu, sa femme l'a voulu.
S'il est cocu, sa femme l'a voulu.*

There are times when I wonder, nowadays, if that incident ever took place. But Little Roger was there too, at the time, and he swears it did.

III

Philip posted a fairly comprehensive guard, as we didn’t know which direction the Germans would come from, if they came; and we all camouflaged our sleeping places. Derek, in particular, was so thoroughly camouflaged that I nearly walked on him, coming back in the twilight to the orchard.

We did a short schedule on the W/T van and learned that Richard (now recovered from his accident) and Guy were going to join us in two days.

Then, while darkness fell, I lay on my stomach in the orchard. Except for the small noise of bats flitting between the apple-trees and the clumsy buzzing of shard-borne beetles, there was no sound to be heard. Camp discipline was good.

I ticked over in my head the pros and cons of the situation.

Item. We were short of petrol. And there is nothing so useless as a mechanical vehicle without fuel.

Item. We were short of food, and damned short of cigarettes (very bad for one’s temper).

Item. There were too many Germans around. (Nothing to be done about that.)

Item. We had come a long way and done no work yet. (That would solve itself.)

Not very many cons, in fact.

Item. We were all getting on very well together. What tension there was was directed away from one another towards our ever-present, potentially dangerous, and largely unseen enemies. (This made living very enjoyable, for we really appreciated one another.)

Item. Good weather. (Good—Oh!)

Item. Good discipline, but of a laconic nature, within whose framework we could really enjoy ourselves.

Item. No office work, very little administration, except of a hand-to-mouth, day-to-day kind.

Item. Never knew what would happen next day. (All right so long as you don't let it get you down. Anyway, one was getting used to it, and it adds a kind of savour to life, making it more precious and more intense.)

Quite a lot of pros, and near-pros.

I undressed and climbed into my sleeping bag. I like sleep, and one sleeps so well and wakes so fresh in the open. . . .

At 0400 I was wakened by a hell of a row from the direction of Morlaix; a lot of shelling and small arms fire. It was the sort of noise you would expect to hear gradually coming nearer to you. The moon was up—it was the last quarter—and a thick mist had settled on the orchard, and the trees were dripping.

I lay and listened to the noise, and shivered in my sleeping-bag, partly because I was scared, partly because I was cold. But drifted off to sleep again, and didn't wake till 0630. By then the sun was lifting the moisture from the trees and the grass.

The clatter earlier on had been an American attack on Morlaix. We didn't know the result of the brawl. Nor did we know about Brest yet.

As I sat smoking my last cigarette, a couple of 15-cwts., with a scout car for protection, left for Rennes to pick up rations and stores, and collect the doctor. We rather felt we'd have a use for him before long.

Roger called us together and told us to get ready to go up and visit the Americans, and find out what was going on about Brest. It was preferable to go in some style, as there was less chance of molestation; so Roger and Little Roger and I took scout cars and Derek and Philip took jeeps, and we collected a posse of likely-looking marines.

It was this day, I think, that I first got to know Marine Tower, a large carrot-headed Cockney, who was to be a godsend, standby, or what you will. He was riding on top of my scout car.

We drove along a road which led through St. Thégonnec, Plouvorn and Lesneven. At a crossroads just outside Plouvorn some French villagers came out.

"Ah," they said, "The English."

They told us they had looked after some R.A.F. men, had hidden them, and clothed them, and sent them back to England. As an after-thought, they told us that some Germans had passed the cross-roads five minutes earlier in a truck. We decided to give chase, and proceeded at about 35 m.p.h. in a carefully rehearsed formation.

Derek led, in his jeep, followed by Little Roger in a scout car, with Roger senior, as a kind of queen bee or sacred cow in the middle, and Philip and myself following. I was rearguard, in case of any funny business, and the Bren-gun turret of my scout car was traversed right aft.

We came on the Germans after ten minutes or so. They had stopped, and were probably only too glad to give themselves up, for there was only need to fire two shots or so before their hands went up.

They had a very nice Opel truck, with any amount of food on it, and about 80 gallons of *brennstoff*—ersatz fuel which they described as being bad in distinctly obscene German words.

We took them along with us for the rest of the day, and obtained a certain amount of cynical enjoyment from the rapidity and violence with which they claimed Polish nationality in order to escape the vituperation of any Frenchmen we happened to meet. (They may have been conscripted Poles, but I doubt it. Their German was too good.)

We puddled about, through Lannarvily and then south towards Brest, where we eventually caught up on the American armour, near Ploudaniel.

There was no chance of an attack on Brest, until at least three days later, we were told.

As we left, Roger remarked that at the present rate, it looked as if the surrender of Brest would have to be included among the peace terms. For, he said, having tried to take Cherbourg without armour, the pongos were now trying to take Brest without infantry. They would learn, perhaps, one day.

At Ploudaniel we left our prisoners, and while the hand-over was being negotiated, I went into the churchyard with a Frenchman. He wanted to show me something. It was the beautifully tended graves of some R.A.F. men who had crashed nearby.

I had seen the more-than-loving attention given by the French to the newly filled British graves in the assault area, but these graves at Plondaniel were dated 1941. It was somehow very moving to see how proud the French were of them, and how it was as though these dead men in some part were numbered by the French among their own.

We returned with the captured truck to Pleyber-Christ. Marine Tower had obtained a hundred cigarettes from somewhere, and presented us each with 20, bless his heart.

IV

On the morrow I went to the main square of Pleyber-Christ, which smelt, as all village squares in that part of the world do, of cow and horse, and there collared a Resistance guide. For Roger and I had decided to fill in time by having a look at the coast north of Morlaix.

At Morlaix, just liberated by the Americans, the town was *en fête*, and great was the impression caused on us by the attractive Morlaisiennes.

The Resistance said there were Germans at Lanmeur and Tregastel, but we didn't feel so sure, and believed that, in any case, they would surrender. So we fought the inhabitants of Morlaix gently but firmly off our vehicles and pushed on.

As we passed through Lanmeur feeling rather uncertain of our reception, the deserted streets came alive, suddenly, with people, and blossomed out with flags.

The Germans had fled south early that morning, but not without massacre. There were bloodstains in the main street, and two weeping women told me that their husbands had been killed by the Germans as they passed through.

At Plougasnou and Tregastel it was the same story. The Germans had left that morning, taking 30 hostages.

The entire town of Plougasnou assembled and sang *La Marseillaise* and *God Save the King* (with a kind of music-hall exuberance which saved us from embarrassment) followed by *Tipperary*, of which most of them seemed to know not only the refrain but all the verses.

The schoolmaster presented me with a photograph of his wife, for reasons which, even now, I am unable to discover.

At Tregastel, it being then 1400, we were regaled with, of all things on a thirsty afternoon, *creme de menthe* (the harlot's liqueur) and green pears. (Though bottles of whisky and wine, and even loaves of the then priceless bread, were also thrust on us.) Roger became interested in a lovely young thing, with a classical face, the bloom on which had to be seen to be believed. He had to be towed away.

Liberation was nice, but it was exhausting. And it was somewhat annoying to find, after a highly triumphal exit from Tregastel, that one of the troops was lost. When I found him, after a somewhat shamefaced return, he was seen to have been scandalously over-served with *creme de menthe*, and was lying with a beatific smile on his face and his head on the lap of Miss Tregastel 1944, while an admiring and respectful little crowd commented favourably on his physique and general impressiveness. (Ah, *les soldats Anglais*!)

The doctor had arrived, thank God, with the rations, when we got back to Pleyber Christ. So also had Richard. We demolished a bottle of brandy between five of us that evening after supper.

It was so damp at night at Pleyber-Christ, that we thought we would move to the coast, next day, for health's sake. Roger said Carentec was nice, so we went up through Morlaix and the convoy eventually paused just outside Carentec, while I went ahead to find quarters.

There were no Germans there, but the town had not been visited by Allied troops, so the whole business started again. When, an hour later, after finding a pleasant house with grounds and a suitable place for parking the vehicles, I returned to get the others, I was not alone.

My jeep looked like a hearse, so many were the flowers on it, but instead of corpses there were, I think, two girls on my knees, and three sitting in the back, pulling the driver's short hairs, and making him squeal with delight.

Roger was furious. Why, he demanded, had I seen fit to go and make an exhibition of myself while he'd been sitting sweltering in the sun and the dust? I pointed out that you couldn't liberate a place without showing signs of it, and that I, like everyone else, believed in taking the rough with the smooth.

It was jealousy on his part, of course.

We got the trucks in, in the end, and all *les civiles* outside, and sat down, feeling slightly dazed. Also very thirsty.

We had supper early and planned to send the chaps ashore by watches, and go ourselves to study the form. It was, therefore, not surprising that, when the local Chef de la Resistance came to call and asked us to go up and drink at his house, we were hardly enthusiastic.

I assured Roger that we wouldn't have had much luck anyway, for the marines were certain to have got to grips with all the most attractive numbers before we appeared on the scene. But it didn't really persuade either him or myself, and we made our way morosely to the home of the Chef, a swarthy little half-caste. He lived there with his appallingly ugly wife who alienated our sympathy rather by keening over us.

As I said just now, we were suffering from a raging thirst which two quarts of ale wouldn't have drowned. A diet of brandy and dry biscuits, which was what we were treated to, seemed likely to produce constriction of the throat and other signs of the spavins.

Roger was being rather sulky and tiresome and pretending not to talk French—which he does perfectly. I pinched him under the table. He retaliated but did not respond to treatment.

We left as soon as we decently could. Roger was just like a frustrated tom-cat. "It's physically bad for me," he said. "Physically bad for me, to have to pass two hours of my precious time with a shocking little tyke like that."

I felt rather the same.

We left next morning, after a flag-showing drive through the town, during which I spotted a most attractive little creature in a pale blue blouse and shorts.

I remarked on her charm to Marine Tower. He shook his head sagely. "I wouldn't worry about that," he said. "She's going to 'ave 'er 'air shaved off to-day."

He appeared to know the local situation pretty well.

At the request of the Resistance, Roger sent me off with a sergeant and six men on an offensive sweep through St. Pol de Léon and Roscoff. The only Germans in that part of the world promptly retreated to a strong-point just outside Roscoff, where they sat down behind two anti-tank guns and plenty of cover. There were fifty or so, and they weren't going to surrender. So, feeling rather shamefaced, we left them, as there weren't enough of us to fight it out. The French were very understanding, and merely asked us to get a stronger party up soon, to mop up the Huns, who were being *méchant*.

We rejoined Roger, and made for Lannilis. At the village of Le Folguet we were offered the church school as quarters, but it was so smelly and dirty, after being left by the Germans that we couldn't face it. In particular the sanitary arrangements were neither sanitary nor even arrangements.

In a mood of slight dissatisfaction, Roger and Philip and I set off to look for more pleasant quarters. We found a little pinewood next door to a fifteenth century farmhouse, which would do, and then pushed on to Lannilis where the German strong-point had just surrendered. Some 300 Germans were sitting by the roadside, reminding me of cobras with their poison fangs removed. Within and beyond the town was a litter of steel helmets, hand-grenades, rifles and other concomitants of surrender. And over all, hung again, the atmosphere, intangible but none the less real, which lies in the air immediately after a battle.

Before a battle or skirmish there is one kind of atmosphere, a tense unpleasantness, very real and recognisable once you have experienced it. The aftermath, on the other hand, is more relaxed, thicker, and has in it something of a drowsy lassitude.

Impossible to describe but impossible not to recognise, once you have known it.

As I was saying, before that fumbling attempt to describe the indescribable, we now had new quarters, and were pleased with them. The farmer was a nice old boy, and his wife a pleasant, energetic little body. They had a daughter of about twenty who had been smitten with infantile paralysis, and lay all day, all night, in bed, unable to move, but gay and charming, and talkative.

Downhill, about a quarter of a mile away, was a young trout stream, where water beetles and water-boatmen played. Our beds were on pine needles under tall and kindly trees. The air was balmy and dry.

We were about four or five miles north of Plabennec and had a grand-stand view of the air attacks on Brest.

We were well content.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I

IT is not usually easy for me to get up in the morning, but on this particular morning I awoke at 0600, and went down to the stream to wash. The sun was just beginning to comb away the mist from the valley, and I felt as if there was an extra tingle, as of expectancy, in my body, as I dried myself. As the light slowly thickened between the tree-branches, I awoke the sleeping camp.

After breakfast, Derek left for divisional H.Q. returning an hour later with no immediate news of the fall of Brest. Whether it was shame at taking so long over the business, or mere annoyance at his continual querying, he didn't know, but he said Division were becoming a little chilly, and very cagey about their forthcoming attack on the port.

Richard and I, with Sergeant Walsh (a tough little Welshman), Marine Tower, Ilford, two drivers and two others, set off for the coast to the north-west of Lannilis. In that town, I asked what the local form was. There weren't any American troops there just then, so I addressed a sensible-looking young Frenchman.

He told me there were about 1,500 Germans in the radar station near St. Pabu. I wasn't much interested in radar stations, but was feeling the time had come for us to do something to justify our existence. So I decided to take a dekko, or Indian look, at the place. An excited little crowd gathered round and chattered at us. As we left, an old man shouted:

"Pas de quartier!"

and the cry was taken up by the rest. I smiled a little grimly at the idea of a force of nine men giving no quarter to 1,500 firmly ensconced Germans—if there really were 1,500 there.

We drove slowly over a damaged bridge, and turned along the road to St. Pabu. I had my map in front of me, and told myself, as we passed each contour, bend in the road or other feature; another six kilometres before we have to act . . . another five and so on. I was scared.

We met a funeral cortege, following four coffins, just after crossing the bridge, and, asking who had been killed, were told four young men had been tortured and then shot by the Germans now at St. Pabu. The sobs of the bereaved women had an almost unbearable effect on me, and I could see that the others were affected too. As we drove on, I worked it out in my mind. Some informants placed the number of Germans at 400, others at 2,000. They had been behaving like savages, and had twice refused to surrender to the F.F.I. They might, however, surrender to regular troops.

Viewed dispassionately their situation was not enviable. A little island of hated men, in a hostile country and with an hourly expectation of air attack or artillery bombardment by a force of (to them) incalculable weight, they should, by rights, be only too willing to throw the sponge in.

Your German, of course, is damned brave in desperation, particularly if he is a well indoctrinated Nazi.

Still, he could be bluffed. It was worth trying, just to get the scum out of this land, and to remove a shadow from French eyes.

We proceeded very carefully, doing a recce on foot before reaching the top of any crest, however small, for fear of being silhouetted on the skyline, and showing our puny nakedness.

Once we were close enough, the nettle would have to be firmly grasped, but there was no use in risking things till then.

So, we soon reached the village of St. Pabu, nestling in a hollow, and I called on the mayor, who had a most impressive white beard. He gave me a rough estimate of 400 as the number of Germans.

I thanked him, and said I doubted if we could be certain of doing anything, but would make *une petite reconnaissance*. I had to turn down offers of help from the F.F.I. They would have been an embarrassment, and would probably have got us all killed.

Then Richard and I spoke to the men.

I had already decided to go in myself and demand the Germans' surrender, bluffing them into believing I was an emissary from a large force. If it worked, so much the better. If not, I wouldn't be alive to answer an angry court of inquiry. Richard agreed, after a little persuasion, not to accompany me, but to take the others and watch developments from about 500 yards away. But Sergeant Walsh and Tower said at once:

"If you're going in, sir, you're not going without us."

I opened my mouth to tick them off, but there was that in their eyes which made me silent. So they were allowed to come.

Richard left, and was guided by a very plucky Frenchman and his wife to a point of vantage.

For a moment it occurred to me to tell the drivers of the vehicles to drive up and down just out of sight of the Germans, with much noise and dust, so as to give an impression of larger numbers, but that wouldn't have deceived anyone. So I told them to stay where they were, and one driver to keep Richard informed if any other Allied troops came along.

The three of us crawled up to a low ridge, to see what the place looked like. We could see the gate, with two armed sentries on it, and the heads of the crews of three quick-firing guns.

I tied a not-very-clean white handkerchief on to my carbine, and hoped it would do. Then we crawled to the road and stood up together.

So far so good. The Q.F. guns did not traverse towards us, and no one fired a shot.

It was about 300 yards to the gate; down a little slope, turn left, and up a dusty road, all in full view of the enemy; it was the longest distance I have ever walked.

My mouth was dry and I was all twisted up inside. Walsh's and Tower's steady step just behind me cheered me a little. I had to take a round turn and two half hitches on my innards to keep me moving. Not much fun, I thought.

Walsh, bless him, muttered. "By God, look you, it's the guts you have." I was grateful to him, for I've never been so frightened.

Not even was I able to stand outside myself and watch. There was no time for self-observation.

The sentries at the gate waved us to come in. I shouted at them in German to open the gate. They did.

I sent for the *Kommandant*. He was apparently at lunch. I looked at my watch. It was noon.

"Where did you learn German, Englishman," said a sentry.

"I've been to Germany several times before the war."

"How did you like it?"

"It's all right."

(Lumme, I thought, is this a tea-party?)

Five minutes later, the *Kommandant*, a Luffwaffe chap, came up with four other officers, and a bodyguard of about ten men.

He gave a Hitler salute. I was annoyed at this, and merely stated my business without saluting.

With him were two other Luftwaffe types, who probably wouldn't have looked particularly formidable without their helmets but did with them, a naval sub-lieutenant, and a really tough-looking, hard-drinking gunner, who later claimed to have been in the Afrika Korps, and looked at me as if I was a bad smell.

Only the naval sub-lieutenant spoke any English. We exchanged views in a mixture of English and German. (It's damned hard to be really authoritative unless you speak a language well, I find.)

"How many men have you?" I asked.

"We cannot tell you. How many have you?"

"I may not say."

"We will not surrender to a small force."

"I am the representative of a large force. If you do not surrender to me, I will return and call for an air bombardment, for *Kannonen* and *Panzer*. You had far better give up now. *Eure Lage ist hoffnungslos.*"

"You surely do not suppose we should let you leave here alive."

(I knew that, dammit.

(a) They don't respect a white flag if it doesn't suit them.

(b) They half thought they were in a position to demand my surrender, rather than I theirs.)

It seemed as if an *impasse* had been reached. For fully half a minute

neither side spoke. It struck me, idiotically, that this was the sort of awkward silence that must happen to a newly married couple who haven't yet found out what to talk about.

Then some of the Germans at the other end of the strong-point opened fire against Richard and his boys. It was a nasty moment, but the *Kommandant* was obviously more worried about it than I was, for he at once sent some of his bodyguard, at the double, to call off the German fire.

Tower had by then moved up to cover me with the Bren gun, and Walsh coolly mounted to the parapet to wave to Richard to cease fire.

This gave me the measure of the Germans. They obviously wanted to avoid trouble, even more than I did.

Hoping that none of our chaps had been hit, I turned to the *Kommandant* and told him that if I did not return to my people within half an hour, my rear party had orders to go up and get the bombers and the artillery.

That did it. There was a lot of discussion, and the Afrika Korps chap, who was the only one against surrender, was obviously overruled.

"All right," they said. "We will come with you if we may keep our weapons, but you must protect us from the French terrorists, and, if we may, we will leave our men here, in order that they may not be fired at. But we should like your main body to take charge of us. For we do not trust the French not to snipe us, unless we surrender to a larger force."

Secretly wondering where I was going to find "a main body," I acquiesced, for I had gone in with my weapon on. Fair's fair, I suppose. I began to feel rather like the referee at a football match, so far as the French and the Germans were concerned.

The officers and I left the radar station and stood in a little group about 30 yards away outside the gate. Sergeant Walsh and Tower stayed at the gate as a precaution.

Before the *Kommandant* left, he signalled to one of his men, who surreptitiously handed him a grenade. Seeing that Tower had noticed this as well as myself, I did not make any remark, but signed to him, by a wink, to keep his eye on it.

Richard then approached, calmly, as if it was the sort of thing that happened every day.

He had received news of a battalion of Yanks with tank-destroyers and armoured cars about 2 miles away. They had asked if we wanted them to come up. Of course I wanted them to come. Answer to the maiden's prayer. None of our chaps, thank God, had been hit.

While we waited, I suggested to the Germans that we sat down and smoked.

I had only four cigarettes with me, but they seemed to have plenty. A rather strained conversation took place.

"Brest is not going to fall," said one.

"Germany is winning the war," remarked another.

I ventured to differ, but said they were entitled to their opinion. (Richard muttered to me that from the show these chaps had put up, it looked, didn't it, as if Germany would win the war.)

"Well, it's been a long war; five years," I said brightly.

"Not too long for us, we can take it."

"So can we."

They laughed.

"Of course," said the Afrika Korps type, "You and we ought not to be fighting each other. We ought to be together against these Asiatic Russians."

"What about the Asiatic Japanese?" I asked.

"Oh, to hell with them. (*Quatsch!*)"

The *Kommandant* asked me what kind of troops we were, and I said we were *Kommandotruppen*. He noticed the parachute on my sleeve, and said he was surprised to see a naval officer who was a paratrooper.

I replied that he was entitled to be.

They gradually began to find that they all spoke moderately good English. I was feeling tired, and my German was deteriorating.

At length the first Americans arrived. Not realising the form, they started to demand surrender again. I told them it was all set, but they went on.

America, they said, was the richest country in the world. Though, as prisoners, the Germans wouldn't be in Paradise, they would have good food and good quarters. Their wounded and sick would be looked after by the best doctors in the world. And so on.

The Germans asked permission to go and get a few clothes.

"You don't need clothes," said the American interpreter, "We provide you with clothes."

The Afrika Korps chap said, not without some dignity, that he preferred his German uniform to any American clothes, however good.

In the end agreement was reached, and we were back to where we were when the Americans arrived.

At one point, the *Kommandant* was noticed by Tower to be playing with the hand-grenade behind his back. To this day I do not know if he meant to pull the pin out, commit hari-kari, and take us with him. On being tapped by Tower on the arm, he put one hand in front of him empty, then rather shamefacedly the other, carrying the grenade. I was relieved.

The Afrika Korps type—true to the evergreen German idea of splitting the Allies—remarked in an undertone to Richard; "One sees the difference between you and the Americans; you are so much more refined."

Richard scowled at him. It was the sort of awkward thing he would say.

The German other ranks were lined up, and the *Kommandant* made them a short speech, ending up with a "Heil Hitler." (And a *hey nonny no.*)

I walked down the long line; there were 280 of them; and as I walked I heard some of them whisper:

"Er ist der Kriegsmarine."

It wasn't much to be proud about, but I felt curiously elated, though tired. Nothing I would ever have to do would seem so hard as this had been.

Then there was a reaction and a headache came on. Richard and I sat down and ate a K ration each. And Marine Tower came up with a bottle of wine from which I drank with great pleasure. I was thirsty.

Richard went off into the radar station, found an Opel car, filled it with wine from the German store, and, of all things, tooth-brushes, and brought it out.

While he was away I smoked, and watched the line of buses fill up with prisoners.

I said good-bye to the American officer in charge and thanked him. He was very nice about it all.

When, at last, we turned to go, the mayor was waiting. He shook us all by the hand, and the curé blessed us, and all the people shouted.

That, thank God, was that.

II

A kind of jungle service had apparently been established between St. Pabu and the next town we visited, Ploudalmézeau, for we were so thronged that I had to ask the F.F.I. to part the crowd in order that we might move. Richard and I had to kiss about 40 dampish babies. (My heart goes out to all electioneering candidates from now on.) Had it been the little creatures' mothers, our job would have been far more interesting.

We progressed through Porspoder and just beyond. An excited little man of whom I'd asked directions, replied:

"Je pleurs de joie,"

and wept on my shoulder. Richard and the marines tittered.

Returning to camp through Argenton, an English woman's voice was heard screaming:

"Stop! For God's sake, stop!"

We stopped. A woman of about 32 rushed up to us, and seemed surprised that we were English rather than American. She was English, married to a young Frenchman, and having been in these parts since the arrival

of the Germans, had not spoken English for four years. Our clipped speech delighted her, it seemed, and she asked us to stay, to have a meal, a drink, anything. Churlishly, I refused, for we could not delay our return to camp. But I promised to return next day, if possible.

Passing back through Plabennec, which was being desultorily shelled by a battery near Brest, we came upon the melancholy remains of a German horse-drawn convoy which had been shot up two or three days before by Tomahawks.

Of about 200 horses, about 140 had been killed, and their bloated corpses disfigured the landscape for several miles. Out of the shattered wagons the French were picking anything that could be of use to them. It was altogether a rather squalid sight.

Back in camp, we found Guy had rejoined us. He was tinkering with the inside of one of the trucks, and was covered with engine oil, but nearly recognisable as our boyhood's playmate. It was grand seeing him again.

My infernal stomach gave me trouble that night, and I had a nasty nightmare about the day's activities.

Roger, Philip, the doctor and I revisited Argenton next evening, and we were rapturously greeted. The Englishwoman and her friends asked us to stay to supper, and in the end Philip and I did actually stay, because it would have been curmudgeonly not to do so. Walsh and Tower also stayed, and a good time was had by all.

We felt we had to assist the Englishwoman to get back to some British authority, and arranged to convey her and her husband, and more household and wardrobe goods than we had bargained for, to Morlaix, where the Civil Affairs chaps took over.

When, many months later, I met her again by chance in Paris, she told me she had afterwards been through a most E. P. Oppenheim series of mishaps, including a short term in a French cooler, from which she had been later apologetically released.

Roger and the doctor returned to our new base H.Q. near Dinan, and Richard and Philip and I set up a forward H.Q. for Brest, at Carentec where Guy also joined us. Derek returned to Courseulles with Little Roger and prepared for an advance northwards with the Canadians and the British.

We had little to do the next few days, but Richard and I went out on a tour through the Lannion Peninsular, visiting Plouescat, Perros-Guirec, another Tregastel, and other attractive places, whose beauty was enhanced by the absence of the holiday-making crowds from England and America who, in peacetime, would infest such places.

We were, to tell the truth, tiring a little of constant acclamation, of being stared at as though we were strange but kindly animals, whether we were eating or sleeping or talking or anything else. (I began to doubt if even the true meaning of *privy* was understood by the French.) We

were growing tired, too, of the hordes of little children who crowded round us demanding gum, or chocolate, or cigarettes (*pour papa*). What, I was beginning to wonder, would be the German equivalent when we ultimately reached the Fatherland? *Eine cigarette für mein vati*, I supposed. We achieved a certain fellow-feeling for the giant panda.

In truth, our growing tired of these demonstrations was merely a part of our feeling tired in general, for it had been an exhausting fortnight.

But it was impossible not to become attached to these Bretons, who were so kindly, and who couldn't do enough for us.

I remember one evening in particular. Richard and I were late finishing our work, which included getting rid of some anti-personnel mines in a house not far from Perros, where Henry Sienkiewicz lived in an absurd Wagnerian castle and wrote *Who Vadis?* We found a little field for our camp, and were promptly begged by the owner, a farmer, to go, all 10 of us, and feed in his house. It would have been like a blow in the face to him if we had refused, so we took our own food and gave it to his wife to cook for us.

And finally we ate by candlelight, with all the farmer's friends, including the mayor and his wife and son (Michel), and Pierre who was in the Navy. They refused to eat our food and, from their poorly stocked larder, kept pressing little pieces of home-cured ham and omelettes on us.

After supper we sang, the Bretons, and the marines and all of us, all we could remember of French and English songs, *la Madelon*, *Auprès de ma blonde*, *Au clair de la lune*, Breton fishermen's songs, *There is a Tavern in the Town*, *Roll Out ze Barrel*, etc. Our repertoire was scanty and uninspiring beside theirs, but they liked it, and we ended up with rousing renderings of *La Marseillaise* and *Tipperary*—which is regarded by the French as an alternative National Anthem. (Just as well, for *God Save the King* is too stately and sixteenth century for such occasions.)

Pierre's wife, after ten years barrenness was expecting a child, and Pierre's delight was enhanced tenfold by the fact that it would be born after the Liberation.

When I went to say good-bye to the mayor and his wife, they forced me to drink a toast with them, and I looked at the family pictures, which included M. le Maire as a *sous-lieutenant*, 1915.

And when we left, the mayor's son, Michel, followed us, until, we climbing a hill so steep that he could not keep up with us on his bicycle, he stood and waved at us, a little sadly, as long as we remained in sight.

Back in Carentec, Philip and I turned in early on the pine-needles, and, drinking a soothing brew of coffee, talked with a more revealing intimacy, of ourselves and our personal fears, affairs, and ideals, than can usually be achieved by two tongue-tied English people. I can remember appreciating him and savouring his extraordinary charm of manner and diffidence—combined with confidence, and wishing that we were some-

times not quite so busy and preoccupied, as to be unable to get to know one another.

It seemed the right thing to do to obtain some orders, so next day I left for the rear H.Q. near Dinan, deprecating, on the way, a newly formed habit (picked up by the Frenchmen during the apple harvest) of throwing apples to men in passing vehicles. It was a gesture kindly meant, no doubt, but if you are travelling at fifty and an apple hits you, it produces a hell of a dent.

Dinan was its pretty, slightly ecclesiastical self, but the high bridge had been blown up in part. Dinard, on the other hand, was rather a mess, with much shattered German transport about, and without its prosperous, pre-1914, William le Queux atmosphere; and St. Malo was a hulk. Furthermore, for the benefit of those who might think it worth a visit because of its name, Belle-Isle-en-Terre doesn't live up to its nomenclature.

Roger, freshly returned from Army H.Q., was deciding about the future.

The front, as such, was breaking up more and more. Montgomery was fighting his great action south-west of Paris, and the Americans (blast them, I thought) were going to cash in and sweep round, pivoting on the left wing. It was for this purpose that troops were being withdrawn from the Brittany ports. These would be invested, and Brest, at any rate, captured by assault, as and when convenient.

From us there were needed parties to cover the ports from Le Havre to Dieppe and Rouen, the Paris operation, and a holding party for the Brittany ports. My own future wasn't certain, but as Jim was being sent to replace me at Carentec, it looked as if I was due for one of the north-eastern parties.

At any rate, I was to return with Jim, pick up two scout cars that had broken down, and stand by for moving, so that the next two days were spent in collecting the damaged vehicles and towing them the hundred-odd miles from Carentec to Dinan.

For some reason, known probably to Dr. Freud and few others, I have never liked motor transport. I do not drive and I hate being driven. Still more do I hate being driven in a car that is towing another. And even more still, do I hate having to conduct four of the brutes a hundred miles along thronging roads. As long as the road is more or less empty it's all right, but about two-thirds of this road was occupied by convoys going both ways; and to add even more to the discomfort, we found ourselves sometimes in the middle of a fast convoy which was trying to overtake a slower convoy.

The motor vehicle is an invention only less repulsive than its overgrown little sister the flying-machine.

All was well, however, in spite of the convoy troubles, until we came to the nineteenth hill, when both the towing vehicles began to boil over.

One of the drivers, opening the radiator too soon, was badly scalded on the face and hands, so I had to abandon two vehicles and rush him into the H.Q. 30 miles away for treatment, and dig up another driver to take over his vehicle. So far, it was being another of those days.

But Marine MacDonald had just arrived back from England, and volunteered to help. As he drove back in search of the abandoned machines, with a kindly but nonchalant disregard for my nerves and other people's skins, he told me of his time in England, whither he had gone together with the devilish captured Peugeot three and a half weeks before.

He was, he said, now officially engaged, and, had it not been for his mother refusing permission, would now be married. This came as a bit of a shock. It was strange, but I had never regarded him as having had a mother. He always seemed to be one of things that just happened, like earthquakes and volcanoes, and V.I.'s, only in a more pleasant way, of course. It was hard not to laugh outright but I had to stop myself. He's such a good type that I couldn't bear to have offended him.

On the way through Dinan for the second time that day, I saw Guy's face peering at me from behind a tall, cool-looking glass of inviting fluid, in a wayside cafe. This was too much; so I left MacDonald in charge of towing operations and joined Guy.

It was beer, or, rather a yellowish liquid which the French, in their laughing way, refer to as beer. We sat and talked, and were later joined by Gordon, who was in bad form, as, poor devil, he was just beginning to succumb to a recurrence of malaria—a relic of Sicily.

The headquarters was at Ploudhien, near Mordreuc, just on the edge of the estuary of the Rance, where it leads out to St. Malo. It was not a bad spot. We had four or five houses, each in its own grounds. There was a water-mill on one side of the estuary, and an arty-crafty chateau on the other side, backed by olive-coloured trees. You could see the suspension bridge up above St. Malo, which had been broken by the R.A.F. In the marines' quarters was a most interesting privy—a 12-family 4-holer, with sizes and heights graded according to age-group.

We settled in very comfortably there, except that our house was shared by us with some friends of the owners, a curé and his two aged aunts. It was also full of the most appalling *bric-a-brac* that even a French interior-decorator of the early nineties could devise.

We bathed a good deal, and sat waiting for plans to be finally drawn up.

I learned, with some chagrin, that I wouldn't be going to Paris, as that was rightly reserved for Sam. It would be Derek and Richard and I, with Philip's troop, for Rouen and the ports to the north; Jim, Sam, and my namesake Peter—now recovered from his wounds, for Paris; and Roger would have a H.Q. and direct from there. (He hoped!)

Philip was also annoyed. Many miles of driving a jeep bored him, he said, and he was all for staying in Brittany rather than joining in an ugly rush for Rouen.

On August 23rd, I was reading quietly under an apple-tree, when the B.B.C. came through with the startling announcement, relayed from Paris, that the capital city was in French hands. No one, even Army H.Q., had much idea that this was going to happen, though there had been reports of policemen going on strike, of a complete chaos in the city as a result of French action. For some reason it was thrilling that the queen city of the world should be taking matters into her own lovely hands; and, as put across by the B.B.C., the episode had a vibrant and inspiring touch to it. We were all pretty glad that the freedom of Paris had been won by Parisians, and not by Americans. (Maybe we were ill-informed, but it seemed to us that from the word go, our trans-atlantic cousins had had too much and too good a Press, and that the triumphal march into Paris would be the last giddy word. It was therefore a wise decision to allow Le Clerc to be the "Liberator" of Paris on behalf of the outside world.)

The French were all delighted, and the curé and his aunts (the old ducks), dragged us into their part of the house to drink about fifteen glasses of Fine to the health of Paris. They were distinctly tiddly at the end of it, and wandered unsteadily out to a nook under the trees on the lawn with a dilapidated gramophone, on which they proceeded to play 1924-vintage records of rousing French songs in honour of the occasion, *La Marseillaise*, *Le Chant du Départ*, and so on; over and over and over again. By God, they were pleased.

To celebrate our departure from Brittany and the liberation of the world's first city, Gordon and Guy and Richard and I decided to have a civilised dinner in civilised surroundings. This we ordered at a roadhouse "Au Vieux Moulin," on the road from Dinan to Rennes near Tinteniac, and for it we all put on blue uniform, sloughing off the battledress as a snake sloughs off his old workaday skin.

Roger arrived back from one of his questing visits to 3rd Army just as we were changing. We invited him to come along too. He refused.

"This," he said, "is probably one of the few evenings in the year when you couldn't even interest me in a woman. I've got a bilious attack."

"Och, widdershins" (or something) said Gordon, "And here's me with ma malaria going, too." (With a lot of further untranslatable remarks about it being a sair fecht, etc., etc.)

We had a moderate dinner alongside an artificial waterfall, and were sternly eyed by some U.S. M.P.'s who couldn't decide whether or not we were French—it is presumed because of Gordon's accent. With the dinner we drank some less-than-moderate white Burgundy at a fantastic price. It was the sort of wine you would, in peacetime, use for cooking fish in—if the fish wasn't too particular. And afterwards we drank

Grand Marnier, and were later joined by three officers from the Guards Armoured, who were taking 48 hours' leave there and were even more surprised to see us than we to see them. They had a pleasing attitude towards things in general, and towards British and American tanks, *vis-à-vis* German tanks, in particular. It was from them that I first heard that Germans referred to the Sherman tank as the "tommy-cooker" because it burst into flame as soon as you looked at it. Brutal, and to the point, but they were tank chaps and should know. After all, they were at the sharp end of this war, not the tank-designers.

III

And so it came about that next day I drove away from Brittany to pick up replacements for the scout cars at F.O.B.A.A. I have never been back since.

But for as long as I live whenever mention is made of the word Brittany I shall be reminded of vivid and unforgettable things; of many a clear morning, when Roger, sitting up, tousle-headed in his sleeping-bag, sang—loudly but not untunefully—*La Madelon*, as he put on his socks; of dust, of bright sunlight; of the feverish joy of the Bretons at seeing us, and of their kindness to us; of the impression of goodness of heart and stubbornness of virtue that the country people made on us—I can only hope we made the same on them; of our small whimsies and jokes; of how happy we were and how good it was to be alive.

It was saying good-bye to a part of one's life, to leave Brittany; and at times I felt like the child coming out of the pantomime, leaving the bright lights and the lovely, slightly unreal atmosphere, to grope his way home in the dark, holding his mother's hand very hard, and wanting to cry for some reason he cannot quite understand.

Not since Elizabeth's day, when her old host, Norris of Rycote, lost a son in the wars, have Englishmen fought in Brittany. And truly, the war in Brittany had, at times, an almost antiquarian flavour. Apart from our—and the Americans'—war with the Germans, which at times achieved an almost eighteenth-century formality, and at other times degraded itself into a twentieth-century impersonality, there were various other little wars, no less important to those engaged in them.

Distinguo. Firstly there was the war between the French *patriotes* and the Germans. This was carried on more or less without reference to global warfare (as it is called), on one side with Gallic fervour and enthusiasm, on the other with Teutonic ferocity. In most cases it was characteristic more of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period than our more brutal and more efficient age. Eye-gouging, finger-nail tearing, castrating and so on, are merely incidental to our more modern enlightened wars which are fought at a greater distance.

Secondly, there were minor skirmishes, mainly verbal, between ourselves and the Americans, and ourselves and sundry individual Frenchmen.

Thirdly, there were unprovoked assaults by French cows and other livestock on our camps and by French dogs on our transport.

Fourthly, there was a continuous guerilla warfare with French children out to pinch what they could, either to eat, or as souvenirs.

No doubt there were other minor struggles of one kind or another.

In spite of all this, however, our gallop through Brittany had for all of us a quality, resulting from the circumstances, which would seldom be achieved by any other tour we should undertake. Northern French people are not like the Bretons in any way at all, and when we should get to Germany. . . .

IV

Thus musing, I reached F.O.B.A.A. at Courseulles, and set myself to put up with two or three days of life in the bosom of a flag officer's staff. After the freedom of the life we had been leading, it was most irksome. Fortunately I knew quite a number of the staff, and they tided over the general noisomeness, which they, too, were conscious of. Particularly Little Roger, who had now been detached from us and was dreeing a solitary and distasteful weird at F.O.B.A.A.

Obtaining replacement vehicles, particularly scout cars, was difficult, lengthy, and in a word, not my cup of tea. Why should I worry anyone with the details? The Army were very helpful. A colonel (who had, at some time, been done good to by the Navy) had me to lunch, and then to pass the hours of waiting away, hailed me off to a R.S.D.—which means Recovered Stores Depot. There, all lost, damaged, and other gash stores were collected, done-up and re-issued. It was quite surprising what an amount of blankets, boots, rifles, signals equipment, tank treads, and heavy underwear had contrived to leave their rightful owners. This temple of economy was presided over by a tough major of the R.A.O.C. whose main mission in life was to get rid of pickers and/or stealers.

But this is all very humdrum.

It was while at F.O.B.A.A. that I heard it bruited abroad that Montgomery or one of his wallahs had stated that we should be in Dieppe on 1st September, Rotterdam on 1st October, and Hamburg on 1st December. As you know, he was right about Dieppe. And, if Arnhem had come off completely he might have been right about Hamburg.

At length, the next evening after the scout cars had been obtained, Derek joined me, just as I was lying on a camp bed reading Shakespeare's sonnets, and we made plans to move on together.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I

If I were to write of the rest of our journey as fully as I have done up to now, you would be almost as bored in reading it as we were in travelling it. Almost—if that were possible.

To begin with, as I was awaiting Derek at F.O.B.A.A., the weather broke. The wind shifted to the west, and brought with it many gusty rain storms. Moreover, I did not know Derek as well then as I do now, nor did I like him as much; I began to miss Roger and Guy.

We learned of a composite army force which was proceeding to Rouen in the wake of the forward elements of the Canadian Army, and, very late at night, we joined it. It reminded me of the description in Doughty of the great caravans forming up for the trek to Mecca, and of how the Arabs would band themselves thus together for protection against robbers by the way (as we, for protection against pockets of Germans). Just as the Arabs, at a signal from the master of the caravan, would camp for the night by the sides of their beasts, we lay down, at the evening halt, alongside our vehicles.

It continued raining intermittently as we pushed up along the far-from-golden road to Rouen, and on the few fine mornings, it was chilly in the thick dew. A person working in a town would not notice this, perhaps, so early, but for us it meant that the summer campaign was over.

There were several hundred vehicles in the force, and our rate of progress was only twenty-five miles in two hours, with a ten-minute halt each hour. Ahead and astern, and alongside the convoy columns, were M.P. despatch riders whose job was to guide the columns, and to pick up stragglers. I did not envy them their job; dusty in dry weather, muddy in wet, and always risky.

Derek was put in charge of one column of about 80 vehicles and although he bled a bit about swinging it on a poor naval officer, I could see he was really rather pleased.

By day we would see squadron after squadron of D.C.3's—parachuting or supply planes—fly overhead. So rapid had the northward advance been that this was the only way of supplying forward elements. By night, we would hear heavy bombers passing. How many they were one could never tell, but their noisy hum filled the sky.

East of Caen is a barren ugly plain, over which the sultry August day hung heavily, as we crossed it. Most of us were half asleep, but drowsily one could see many a trace of heavy fighting, anti-tank guns

ringed with the carcasses of tanks they had knocked out, crater after crater from bomb or shell.

At length we bivouacked midway between Lisieux and Evreux. At Lisieux, the town was yet another shapeless, ruined, mass, the only thing which had not been damaged being a hideous shrine to some latter-day saint, the Basilica for Ste. Thérèse, which hovers in bleak white marble over the town, to the eternal discredit of French taste.

It was at this halt that I had another recurrence of nausea and headaching; and it was here that I began more to appreciate Derek. I'd turned in early like a sick animal, but awoke at 0300 to see Derek in pyjamas throwing a waterproof screen over me to keep off the worst of the rain.

Having turned in early, I was first awake, and heard Tower calling the sleeping men in an oddly conversational way.

To one he would say, with a vicious prod; "Do you know a Leading Wren called Williams?"

To another; "How do you like our rest camp?"

To another; "The Skipper, 'e says to me, are you going to marry a Russian woman? Of course I didn't speak Russian then. Not that I do now, of course. . . ."

He is an admirable chap, and I began to note more carefully the facets of his character as they showed themselves. For instance, as we passed through Lisieux, we saw three poor old women sitting on the ruins of what had been their house, with their little bundles of belongings beside them. They had just come back to—nothing. Tower said, "That wrings me, y'know," and looked as if it did.

It was not the first nor the last example of unstudied and ever-present sympathy and humanity of the British soldier, of whom Tower is typical. You could see it in the courtesy with which M.P.s and others would treat Frenchmen driving farm carts. Many times a string of fast traffic would be held up by M.P.s at a crossroad, in order that a couple of lumbering haywains might proceed on their timeless duties. An M.P. corporal, after such an occasion, remarked half-defiantly: "Well, I don't see why they shouldn't use their own roads even if it does slow us up"—as though the majority of us were blaming him, which we were not.

Progress was undeniably slow, for we could only move with the approval of Canadian 1st Army H.Q. and the Canadians were feeling their way north, as yet uncertain of the whereabouts of the enemy. He was half-expected to make a stand at the Seine, I believe.

We passed through Le Neubourg, with its squat but satisfying church, and its many half-timbered houses, and camped for a couple of days in an orchard near Bec Hellouin which, according to a signpost, was a *Champ de Bataille*. Quite what Bataille it was the Champ of I did not know. Nor did I greatly care. The wind was still westerly and gusty,

and there was much rain. So that the long grass in the orchard, which in hot summer weather would have been cool and refreshing to the eye, and a joy to lie on, became to us a dank and noisome weed.

It was here that I heard Marine Tower addressing Marine MacDonald in terms of invective which Shakespeare might have been proud of. What MacDonald's misdemeanour had been I can't remember, but Tower addressed him as:

"You Scotch runt. You kilt-flapping, bagpipe-squeezing, sword-dancing, burgoo-waffling runt."

Richard joined us in a thick rainstorm. He brought news of a large march past by the American Army through the streets of Paris. It caused a lot of unfavourable comment among our chaps, and any Army types who heard of it. This, it was felt, was the ruddy terminus. It was, of course, of a piece with the way news had been handled during this operation. Although in the five division front for the assault on the beaches, three of the divisions had been British or Canadian, it was—to judge from our newspapers just as much as from American ones—an almost entirely American show. The *Daily Mirror* and other papers who should have known better showed practically nothing but U.S. landing craft and U.S. soldiers. And as the campaign progressed it was just the same. For one mention of British arms there were perhaps two of Canadian and five of American. This latest piece of playing to the gallery was merely what a R.A.F. geometrician would call producing the line to infinity.

It was later officially denied that the march past was in fact a march past.

As I have said, there is no point in describing our day-to-day existence. It wasn't just a bore, it was a screeching bore.

Instead, in case you wonder what a scout car is like, I will tell you. There are several types, all varying from one another; Humber, Daimler, White, Morris, and so on. The first three—and in particular the second-named—are pretty fast going astern as well as ahead, and the driver can see what he is doing when reversing. With the Morris, which is slow in reverse, he can only see ahead, and has to be guided in reverse.

This car is more or less completely cased in with light armour. The driver sits low down and more or less in a little cabin of his own. His view is confined to a small horizontal slit a foot long ahead of him, and two even smaller slits on either side of it, through which he is supposed to be able to see what is following him.

On his right hand side, raised up, is the Bren-gunner's seat, covered by a small turret, from which projects the Bren, and on the side of which there is also a 4-inch smoke mortar. The officer sits on the left of the driver, and also raised above him. His (the officer's) head projects through a hatch, and is protected, fore and aft, by mild steel flaps which

cover the hatch when the car is closed down. There are two doors to the car but they are too small and inconvenient to be of much use. Most times you enter by climbing in from the top.

The engine is aft.

Apart from the dashboard and the various levers and what-nots of interest to the driver alone, the inside of the car is full of shelves and brackets and straps. Each is for a particular piece of equipment and is marked in stencil, viz.: W.CUTTER—W.BOT—H'SACK—MAG DRUM BREN—HDLE ST'ING—and so forth. The majority of one's personal gear is stowed on the flat portion of the car, over the engine. There is no room for it inside.

Only a short man can drive a scout car in comfort—i.e. without bumping his head—and he should have long legs. As to the two other members of the crew, they must accustom themselves to fending their anatomy off the edges and corners, of which the machine seems to be largely composed. And they have no shelter from rain or sun or dust.

II

There had been little fighting on the way to Rouen, and we passed but few signs of it. To enter the city we had to cross a pontoon bridge at Elbeuf, and move up the north bank of the river, along the eastern arm of the horseshoe, at the north of which lies Rouen.

We reached the outskirts of the town at about midnight, and waited in a drenching rainstorm. No one knew whether there were Germans in the town or not, though a Canadian patrol was reported to have passed through that evening. It was unwise to enter during the dark hours, so having obtained permission from the master of the caravan to proceed independently, we slept fitfully, sitting up in our vehicles, until first light. Our bivouac site was alongside a burning factory. There was a curious hush ahead of us, alongside us, and across the river, where some 3,000 Germans were said to be trapped in the nook of land enclosed on three sides by the river.

At five-forty I awoke Derek and Richard and the men; we tested our weapons, and mounted the vehicles and then tore into the town through the uncanny emptiness of the morning streets. A Canadian patrol followed on our heels. We were a little conscious of our triggers, but at first saw no sign of life except for a few scrawny cats stealing back from a night out on the tiles. Then windows began to open, drawing towards them the menace of a cocked Bren-gun or carbine, but revealing nothing more sinister than a half-dressed woman or a tousle-headed man; who would begin to shout or clap.

Thereafter the liberation of Rouen followed the same pattern—though with less ebullience—as the liberation of Rennes. Rouen is

more of a cathedral city than Rennes, and has therefore a less extrovert character and a stiffer upper lip.

As we entered, the Germans were still leaving in the direction of Le Havre, we afterwards learned.

For quietness' sake we retreated to the Clinique Tambereaux, just outside the town, and there breakfasted, thus avoiding the questing crowds.

When we had cleaned up a floor in the Clinique—which meant moving a lot of two-days' old food and stale-smelling upholstery and sheets, we took it easy for a few hours, to catch up on our sleep.

Then we went out—as surreptitiously as possible, into the town, and amongst other things I called on some French friends of Jim's. They were quiet, cathedral-town, almost Anthony Trollope characters, but I heard many things of interest from them.

In particular, they thought the R.A.F.'s bombing technique pretty good, and they showed me photographs that they had taken of the German Army in retreat. There were the master race slouching along in twos and threes, unkempt, slovenly, down at heel, wheeling their belongings ahead of them in wheelbarrows and prams, fortunate, some of them in having "organised" a lean Rosinante of a horse, to save their weary legs. One little party had relieved an undertaker of his horses and were chagrined to find that the beasts neither could nor would proceed at anything faster than a discreet and respectable 2 m.p.h.

There was a very sharp contrast between the arrival of the Germans in 1940 and their present shambling departure.

Back in the Clinique we found a minor struggle in progress; for F.O.B.A.A. had sent up his advance guards to take the place over, and they had the infernal nerve to try to throw us out. They didn't succeed. Derek and I shared the bedroom previously occupied by a German admiral. Though local gossip stated that the admiral had never had his wife there, about two-thirds of the room was taken up by a gigantic double-bed, and there were photographs of what I can only suppose to have been the admiral's *Stimulierensfrau*—a very hard-faced French piece—all over the walls.

Whether it was an example of German humour, or a mere accident, I don't know, but I remember noticing when we arrived, a board on top of the German postbox, saying:

"Heute Keine Post."

For the Canadians, Dieppe, ever since August 1942, has had a great significance, and they were now surging towards it, lunging viciously on either side of the axis of their advance, but hitting nothing but air. A burly brigadier, from whom we were obtaining permission to go in with the forward troops, said with a smile that it didn't look as if there would be a fight for the place, and that he hoped he'd be able to call

off in time an air bombardment intended to soften up resistance but which would, in the event, probably hit the Canadians as they entered the town.

And so it turned out. We went in with the forward troops, and there were no Germans there. At the hour intended for the air bombardment we looked a little anxiously into the sky, but the attack had been called off.

Apart from minor points of interest not worth mentioning, Dieppe was chiefly remarkable as being the first town into which we had gone where the water supply was still working. As A. P. Herbert has pungently remarked, the Herrenvolk had done pretty systematic smashing of lavatory pans, but the plugs could still be pulled with positive results. Wonderful, we thought, and pulled them several times for the sheer joy of hearing the gurgle.

You have heard all about flying-bomb sites, and are probably as sick of them as you were of flying bombs during their brief but merciless hour. So I will not write of them. They bore me, too.

What we were all asking ourselves was: where the hell had the German Army gone? It could not move even as fast as we, and yet it had effectively vanished. True, Richard scraped up four sad little satellites in field-grey from a lighthouse near Dieppe. I asked him who his friends were, but he said he couldn't discover as they spoke neither German nor French. So that they couldn't tell us where the German Army was, either.

We pushed on south, without waiting, and entered Fécamp and Étretat. No, the Germans had left those places three days before; but could the French do anything for us? My God, could they? It was a repetition of the other liberation frenzies, but with a little more formality. Derek made a speech in reply to the mayor's speech of welcome; Richard made a speech in reply to one made by the head of the *Anciens Combattants de la Grande Guerre*; I made a speech in reply to one from the *Chef de la Résistance*. Outside the *Mairie* a small riot had developed, resulting from a collision between two excited inhabitants who had rushed to meet us and who were now blaming one another for the clash, while the crowd took sides. Inside we toasted one another with sweet vermouth.

At about one o'clock I sent most of the inhabitants away from our billets, ordered some distinctly squiffy marines to bed, and climbed into my own bed with an impression that my eyes were on swivels, and with a strong tendency to hiccoughs.

It was finally next day that we caught up with the Germans, at a little place called Mantivilliers on the outskirts of Le Havre whither we nosed our way only to find it under shellfire from Le Havre. So that was where the German Army was; and its strength was estimated at 11,000.

We returned to Etretat to find Philip and his troop had caught us up, but that I was to be detached for other duties than Le Havre.

Collecting Ilford and MacDonald I left hurriedly for Rouen to receive my new orders. It was the last time I saw Philip.

III

At Rouen there was a concourse of far too many marines; and only Jim and the Other Peter were there to leaven the lump. The plan was for Jim and me to go up to the Pas de Calais with Bill Jefferies and his troop of amiable thugs, while Richard and Derek made for the Belgian ports, and Philip and the Other Peter stayed with the Highland Division who were attacking Le Havre in the near future.

There was much loud talk from certain sections about how fine a thing the liberation of Paris had been, and one felt as if certain of the marines had been personally and solely responsible for it—or was one a bit jealous? (Yes, one was.) I had my first reliable news of the main battle for about ten days. The British 2nd Army were almost in Brussels, and would soon capture Antwerp; the U.S. 3rd Army were nearing Metz. Had Montgomery's great Falaise battle been *the* battle? Was the Germany Army destroyed? Would the war be over before winter? We half-thought it would. So did most people. There was a feeling as though decay had gnawed away the hard rind of the German Army which was keeping us from Germany and the end of the war.

Jim and Bill and I rumbled wearily up through Abbeville and Montreuil to the little village of Tingry near Samer, just outside Boulogne. There we set up a forward H.Q. in an ugly manor-cum-farmhouse, which we were lucky to find empty.

Of the Pas de Calais, the less said the better. It is a mean and dingy neighbourhood inhabited by mean and dingy people. It had, by reason of the flying bombs, attracted the attention of a large portion of the allied air forces, and as a result presented a chewed-up appearance much in common, no doubt, with that shown by carpets in the Wilhemstrasse and Berchtesgaden areas (towards the end of the war.) Also it rains with appalling frequency and merciless indiscriminacy.

Do not speak to me of that part of the world.

Canadian 3rd Division were responsible for the area, but were pretty thin on the ground, so that roving bands of Germans were to be met along the coast, feverishly retreating into Boulogne, Calais, or the area of the Gris-Nez guns, whence they emerged for occasional patrols.

Accompanied by a sergeant and ten men, I entered—I think before any other troops—Le Touquet. It was raining and trees had been felled across all the approach roads. We crept in, street-fighting fashion, dodging between the dripping pine-trees. The place was almost completely

deserted, and we found only two French workmen in the whole town, and that after a prolonged search. They claimed to be rehabilitating the electric light plant, though for the life of me I can't think why; and stated that there were a few Germans on the golf course. It being a poor sort of day, and none of us having clubs, we didn't visit the course. There were a fair number of mines about, but I saw no booby-traps. Even after a R.A.F. raid or two, the little place still carried some of its atmosphere of pre-war opulence, and one could picture the pleasant care-free futilities which used to go on in the gaily coloured houses—how many years ago?

It was in sharp contrast to the squalid little towns elsewhere in the area, Etaples, Samer, and others. These were crammed stiff with refugees from the battered towns along the coast, though as yet not everyone had left Boulogne and Calais where there were still about 10,000 and 5,000 civilians respectively.

One bright morning, Bill and I having gone up forward to near Boulogne (La Capelle I think it was) met streams of poor wretches emerging from the tortured port of Boulogne. They began arriving at 0600 and only finished at dusk. It was pitiful to see them, old and young, infirm, ill, with children at the breast, or dangling sleepily from the hand, carrying their few belongings on their backs, or—if lucky—in a pram or wheelcart.

And yet they were cheerful. They would almost all smile or wave as they passed us, and not a few shook us by the hand. That, after trudging 8 weary miles. It was the kind of guts and self-denial that made one admire and like the French. They came out just in time. Next morning, Bill and I watched a precision attack on Mont Lambert, a strong-point, just outside the town, by 90 medium bombers, supported by 18 regiments of artillery to keep the flak down and put down ground-markers of red smoke. From where we were, beyond La Capelle, the target was about a mile and a bit away, as the crow flies, across a valley. It was a fine attack, but after watching it, I found myself quivering like an aspirin, as the saying is: Excitement I suppose. Thereafter similar attacks went on every day until the 1,000-bomber attack on the morning of the storming of the town.

The attacks on Boulogne and Calais were being prepared somewhat slowly, and immense concentrations of artillery were being brought up for the purpose. For the Canadians had suffered grievous casualties, and did not see the point in throwing men away, storming concrete. So Jim and a section of marines left to look into Gravelines and Dunkirk, as and when, with the 2nd Canadian Division.

Whether or not you like it, I now propose to give you a brief Baedeker guide to some four of the vast workings which the Todt Organisation began in the Pas de Calais. I do so, not because they were pretty or amusing, but because they impressed me strangely. The four were at

Lottinghem (near Desvres), Mimoyecques (7 or 8 miles from Calais), Watten, and Wizernes. None was much like any of the others. Watten was an enormous concrete box, 200 yards long, 100 yards wide and about 50 yards high. Apart from some large aluminium tanks, it contained many cubic feet of Sweet Fanny Adams. About 30 heavy raids had so ploughed up the ground round about that the Germans were eventually persuaded that there was no future in the business.

Wizernes was a set of galleries deep-dug into the side of a quarry. As the work progressed, the Air Force would come along and be tiresome and do some no-good to the quarry-face. Work would begin again, and the Air Force would come again. And so on. It was quite a do, according to Wizernes locals.

Mimoyecques was really the most impressive, and had the most impressive craters round it. (I measured one crater roughly. It was 180 feet across and 130 feet deep.) A tunnel, dead straight, 2,200 feet long, 30 wide, and 30 high, had been cut through the side of a hill. From it about 12 deep galleries led off through the ground, and from some of these, slanting shafts 300 feet in depth and 25 in diameter led up to slit-openings in a concrete cap or cover. It was like a mixture of a visit to Luxor and trip to the moon.

It's no use asking me what they were for. I don't know, and I don't care. But they were impressive, and it was interesting to note how concrete-crazy the Germans had become.

It was also interesting to note a further sign of German nastiness, at a disused radar station near Lottinghem. They had blown up the generator, and with it about five pups, about a week old. That wouldn't have mattered, but for the fact that they had left the bitch alive, and she, poor little toad, was out of her mind when we found her. She seemed glad to meet us and so we took her back with us and found her a home.

Most of the work, the really back-breaking, soul-destroying, dirty work on these sites, on radar stations and elsewhere, in this part of the world had been done by Todt workers from Russia and Poland, and Czechoslovakia. They had been so badly treated by their masters that the French civilians near by had given them food and shelter, when the departure of the overlords had left them in unaccustomed freedom, but in a strange land. Many were still living with their French hosts when we got there. Also employed on this degrading and pointless work were French lawyers and doctors and scientists who had ventured to disagree with the Germans. They had sickened, and, in most cases, died of exposure and under-nourishment.

This, at least, is what I was told by the people living thereabouts. Even allowing for exaggeration, it is the kind of thing to remember, if ever one is inclined to feel too well-disposed towards the Germans. And it is but a tenth part of a tenth part of what has happened elsewhere.

IV

Orders arrived for us all to concentrate on the H.Q. in Paris on September 18th. This was four days before the intended attack on Boulogne; in which we should not now take part.

There being no other way of whistling Jim up, I went to find him near Dunkirk. He'd got himself a very nice billet with a Belgian farmer who spoke no language except Flemish but appeared to look on Jim as a kind of demi-god. On the way back, I drove through Ypres and Poperinghe, because their names have always rung in my mind. At Ypres I stopped to admire the neat tranquillity of the little Belgian town, for on the whole the Belgian town or village is more orderly and less straggling than its French counterpart.

Out of a mere casual whim I walked to the Menin Gate. There, carved on the stone lintel—as you probably know, but I did not, till then—are the words:

TO THE ARMIES OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE
WHO STOOD HERE FROM 1914 TO 1918
AND TO THOSE OF THEIR DEAD WHO HAVE
NO KNOWN GRAVE

It is magnificent, with a splendour only to be achieved by non-committal Anglo-Saxon monosyllabic simplicity.

Not all the thousands of names inscribed on the walls of the gate, nor all the pomp and circumstance of a Cenotaph ceremony could convey as much. It implies, by association, of course, Pericles':

"Whose story is not written in stone over their graves, but lives on ever after, woven into the stuff of other men's lives."

It is magnificent, I repeat, and for many minutes after seeing it, I did not think I could meet another man's eyes, so sat musing by the bank of the canal, in a rare spell of sunshine.

As it was our last night, Bill Jeffries and I dined on corned beef and a bottle of Dry Monopole '31, brought by him from Paris. The mixture was so wrong as to be nearly right. We then drove up to 8 Brigade headquarters near Wimille, just outside Boulogne: 8 Brigade contained the North Shore and La Chaudière regiments of Canada. We had not seen them since the early days of the Beachhead. We searched out the North Shores, and found the adjutant and the doctor, whom we had met before.

How was the colonel, we asked.

He had been badly wounded two weeks earlier.

And how was Major — (mentioning one of the bravest company commanders I'd ever heard of).

He was killed in the same action.

Both these men became casualties the day before their D.S.O. ribbons arrived for their work in Normandy. Of the whole regiment 900 had been casualties since D-day. Of every 13 men, that is to say, 9 had been killed, seriously wounded, or R.T.U.d from nervous exhaustion. Only about 5 or 6 of the original officers were still with the regiment.

It was a sickening thought. The adjutant had more or less stopped counting casualties. It was a damned sight too painful.

The bottles of champagne we had brought up with us to hand over to them for the celebration of the arrival of the two D.S.O.s (having by chance read of them in the papers), looked rather silly and frivolous. But we left them there.

We talked with them for an hour, and found that they, bless them, had not expected to see us all alive and kicking. True, we had been lucky, particularly Bill's troop during the landing, but we had had nothing like the tough things to do that they had. We felt ashamed, but they were noble chaps, and it was exhilarating to be with them again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I

To get to Paris from Boulogne, you had to pick your way, for most of the river-bridges were blown. The route we took was Boulogne-Montreuil (where Haig's H.Q. was in 1918)—Hesdin—Doullens—Amiens—Montdidier—Compiègne (where last war's Armistice was signed and where Hitler forced Petain's minions to sign in 1940) and thence to Paris through the Porte de la Villette.

And so we said good-bye to the *estaminet* area. Elsewhere than the north of France you find *auberges* and *cafés* and what you will. There, as our fathers know, it is the *estaminet*.

They had gathered in the harvest now, and were threshing it. And speeding lorries and other transport of war had to weave their dexterous way past many a groaning cart drawn slowly by great horses in teams of two and three.

We sped down the Compiègne road, passing the “Tannerie de la Verberie” (why does that remind one of Flora and the country green?), Senlis (what battle was it that was fought there and who won?) and little towns with odd names like “The Wheel which Turns,” and “The Foot of the Green Goose.”

And as we sped, my heart was idiotically singing:

“The last time I saw Paris

Her heart was young and gay. . . .”

and

“Paris, Reine du Monde. . . .”

and

“Sous les toits de Paris, c'est comme ça.”

Why it should be that Paris, that coldest-hearted and most calculating of cities, the ice-queen, should so attract the Englishman, I do not know. For consider the vogue that songs concerning her enjoy. Consider the light that comes into a man's eye—even if he does not already know Paris—when he is told he is going there.

Is it a case of artificial film-star glamour (dammit, I mean GLAMOUR) carefully built up by a nation of publicity agents? Is it that she has in her a portion of the absolute beauty to which all good platonists are attracted?

Or is it merely that she treats us coldly, and that the colder the object of a man's passion, the more ardent he becomes?

— No matter. On this occasion, for the first and probably the last time in a lifetime, beauty was yielding, affectionate, welcoming. We were moved, and warmed by it.

We drove past the shattered aerodrome at Le Bourget. The people were out in thousands to watch the friendly aircraft arriving and leaving.

“*L'aviation*,” they would say, “*Ah! j'adore l'aviation!*”

As great convoys passed, of 3-ton, 6-ton lorries, of tank-transporters, of armoured cars, of petrol trucks, the people would watch, amazed.

“*Ah!*” they would say, “*Le Beau Matériel!*”

(Later I saw a revue in which *Le Beau Matériel* became almost an insult, by antithesis, to *Les Hommes*.)

We reached the headquarters, a large villa, standing by itself in the Boulevard Lannes, and overlooking the Bois. It was messy inside. To begin with, it had previously belonged to a wealthy Argentine who had decorated it in a florid and very tasteless manner. Then it had been a German H.Q. Then there had been a bit of a struggle, and it had surrendered. And finally our headquarters party, with the assistance of 20 German prisoners by day, were striving rather half-heartedly to clean it up.

After supper I called Sam out. He had been working about 14 hours a day for a fortnight, and looked as if he needed a change. I suggested that we should go and seethe gently on the boulevards. He assented. I was sorry afterwards. Sam is an energetic chap and his idea of a gentle seethe was a 12-mile route march with no halts. Colin, who came too, was very pained about it.

We stopped only once, I remember, to look up the Avenue Foch towards the Arc de Triomphe. And then the driver of an American truck, parked by the roadside, shouted out to us:

"Hey, canya direct me to a whore-house?"

It struck me that, as an approach to life's little problems, this lacked *finesse*, but I merely replied that not being Official Guides, we couldn't help.

That incident rather smashed the idyll from my point of view.

Colin and I tried seething by ourselves next day, and even went so far as to indulge in a rather synthetic aperitif at a café in the Champs Elysées.

Parisian women were astonishing, to our unjaundiced eyes. It wasn't anything particular, except ineffable chic that you could spot in the meanest midinette. But you know all about Parisian women. I will only add that, wearing, as they were, highly coloured skirts cut very full, when they rode on bicycles (and *tout le monde* was *à bicyclette*) the exposure of pretty legs was rather bad for one's moral outlook.

The few American W.A.C.s looked very dowdy beside them.

And as for the American troops. For some reason I can't fathom, they looked awful, slouching around, chewing gum, whistling at girls, screaming from lorries. By comparison, the few English troops looked smart and well-behaved.

"Ah, mais ils sont des vrais gosses," said the French indulgently of the Americans.

We got back to lunch to hear from the doctor that Philip had been killed, shot dead, entering Le Havre with the forward troops. It was like a blow in the face. It might have happened to any of us, almost, but of all the people I'd rather it didn't happen to, it mattered more in Philip's case than any except Roger and Guy.

He was a great friend of Roger's, and when the latter returned from Le Havre, whither he had dashed for the funeral, I expected him to be very dejected. I waited for him to mention it first.

He only said: "What got me was to see on the gravepost—Captain P. R. Weston, R.M. Aged 24 years."

(Why speak not they of comrades that went under?)

II

Roger discovered some distant cousins, living near the Victor Hugo. (One of the things about Paris was that a large percentage of the population appeared to be Roger's second cousins.) He rang them up; they were almost hysterical at hearing his voice. He went to see them, and returned with lyrical descriptions of how attractive they and their friends were. Of course, when he'd seen them last, in 1939, they had been 13 and 14. Now they were fully blown. (He was right. They were lovely, though painfully thin.) As I was going out to look into something near Rambouillet, he told me to take them along to buy eggs and butter at farms. They were fascinated by the car, for they hadn't driven in one for five years, they said. They fascinated the driver and myself in return. Maman came too, to ensure fair play, and the two little demons kept turning to me, every 20 minutes, and saying: "*Arrêtez la voiture, s'il vous plaît, pour Maman!*" Maman would utter a lot of short, sharp invectives, laugh gaily, and either she or they or all three would get out and proceed in line ahead to behind some convenient undergrowth. After the fourth or fifth performance, Maman grew tired, and refused to play. The two little blondes seemed to be inexhaustible.

They asked us to a party organised for our benefit. It was the kind of party that could only happen in a newly-liberated Paris. It had neither form, nor design, nor beginning nor end. But it had life.

Cardinal Puff of the most vigorous kind was played until the drink ran out. Then, while about five young Frenchmen vanished greenly from the room to recuperate from their potations, we danced to a very odd set of records. No patriotic French girl had danced during the occupation, but we managed somehow. At about 0200 we began marching round the flat in an endless chain, to the sound of Sousa marches played by a young Greek with a limp and a guitar. The police came to stop the noise. They were seized and brought in, and made to join. They were fed, and someone produced another bottle of brandy. The police left in a condition which can only be described as high. The neighbours came, singly and in groups, to complain of the noise. They, too, were promptly co-opted and joined the party, their frowns changing slowly, almost reluctantly, into ear-splitting grins.

At about 0430, Roger's arm was round Odile, the elder of the cousins, and mine was round Therese, the younger. We had been adopted as "*Filleuls*," and exchanged suitable tokens. A beautiful Greek, apparently straight from Olympus, sang us Greek and other Balkan folk-songs in a high, clear, confident soprano voice. She was a delight.

Between two of her songs I saw Richard talking to a pretty brunette who spoke a hell-bending Balham brand of English. Thinking to catch him out whispering sweet nothings, I leaned over to listen (eavesdrop, if you prefer it).

" . . . not much shortage of leather here," he was booming.

At about five we tottered to bed. But such is the air of Paris and so fit were we after 3½ months of outdoor life, that we all felt like fighting cocks on it.

We were in Paris for about four days all told, when orders came to return to England and re-form. The idea was that it was then or never, for the Arnhem operation had just been mounted, and if it had succeeded completely, we should have had to rush into Germany.

Four days was not enough to be able to judge Paris—unless one was a newshawk (and you can take that which way you like.) But the under-currents beneath the lambent flame of gaiety were there, visible to anyone.

The black market increased its scope to include petrol and American cigarettes and food. The poor fed badly, the rich none too well.

There was a feeling that one needn't worry much for the war was nearly over; and that feeling was far stronger among the newly liberated French than among the rest of us.

There was a general resumption of interminable and pointless political discussions. To hear a couple of (theoretical) French Communists of slightly different views splitting dialectical hairs, until the small hours of the morning (and to the boredom of everyone else present), you would think there had never been a war or an occupation by Germany. You could see that unless some person or persons took a firm line in French politics, there would be a recurrence of that boundless anarchy, expending itself in futile nattering, which characterised French Government circles in the years before the war.

For, much as I admire the French, I fear that they have got their ideas of liberty all balled up. They are far too individualist (an admirable trait but which can be carried too far) ever to agree with one another politically. It would never do. Oh, no. One mustn't let the other man argue himself into a politically stronger position. And yet, in one's private life, one accepts the concierge system, whereby all the comings and goings of oneself and one's friends are known to a frightful old woman sitting by a gate, who may, for all one knows, be a police spy.

But, of course, here I am, indulging in generalities based on insufficient knowledge, just like the worst type of American woman novelist visiting India. I'm ashamed of myself.

At length, it was the morning of our departure. Roger and I had waited after the main body left, to clear up a few points.

We went to call on some Americans. They were complaining about Paris. They preferred London, they said. What was the use of a place where everybody spoke French, and not English.

We called on some French officers, newly arrived from England where they had been for four years. We explained that we were going back to England, and had come to say good-bye.

"You lucky devils," they said. "Wish we were going to London again. It's awful here. All the political chi-chi going on in Paris. God, it's the end!"

We called on the assistant naval attaché. As we were leaving him, a gaunt figure with a two-day beard and an aura of garlic, insinuated itself round the door, with a sheaf of papers.

"Exgus," it croaked. "I want to spik to the Bridish Navy."

"I represent the British Navy," said the attaché.

The Figure's eyes flashed.

"Goot!" it cried. "I haf somethink 'ere which will r-r-r-revolutionise WAR!"

Yes, you guessed right. It was an inventor. They breed like flies, mainly in the precincts of embassies. Generally they invent useful items, like prefabricated, jet-propelled rabbit-hutches and other gadgets of that kind. They are a bane.

III

At last it is time for me to say: Farwel my booke and my devocioun. . . .

So. We started off from Paris, Roger in a jeep with two very shaky tyres, and I in the Opel from St. Pabu. I remember looking back longingly at the Etoile and the Arc de Triomphe as we topped the Avenue de Neuilly. It was raining a little, as though Paris was as sorry to see us go as we were to leave. We took the road through Evreux, Lisieux, and Caen. We passed vast convoys, DUKWS, tank-transporters, everything, moving north and east from the beaches.

By Lisieux the sun had begun to shine again.

One of the jeep tyres, which had been going flat every 20 miles earlier on, began to collapse every five miles. Roger evicted me from the Opel, insisting that it was essential for him to be at Arromanches that afternoon, whereas I could take two days if I liked, and be damned anyway. I bowed to his superior rank, but I didn't like it. Nor did Marine MacDonald who was driving me.

Muttering something about "soon sort that mucker oot," which may have referred to Roger or to the tyre (I'm not sure which), he set to on the tyre. He found it was not a slow puncture, but only a defect in the valve, which he remedied.

As we passed Roger, an hour later, I gave him the two-finger sign which Mr. Churchill has so fortunately cleaned up; and we led him all the way to Arromanches, passing again, for the last time, our three resting places of the assault days, at Douvres la Délivrande, at Tailleville, and at Crepon.

We drove to the N.O.I.C.'s office and were directed to the beaches. It was the same part of the beach as where we had landed—Jig Red Beach. It looked much the same as on June 7th, but less busy, and tidier. The bodies which had lain there when we landed had long since been buried in an orderly row, and the graves were still being cherished with flowers, by the French.

The chaps brewed us some coffee among the dunes. As we drank it, the main body arrived on the beach, and the ninety-odd vehicles drew up in four columns on the hard sand, awaiting the order to go aboard the L.S.T.

Roger and I went for a walk along the dunes. It was about seven in the evening. We were both strangely silent, and I know that the feeling rose up strongly in me, that, after these $3\frac{1}{2}$ months, I was now a part of France, and France of me. It was as though something gripped me by the throat, at the thought of leaving the country, as it had done on the Hard at Felixstowe, waiting to leave England. At the very thought of it I could have yelled, but did not. Roger was probably feeling the same.

Politicians and priests and journalists and other drones have for years been trying to explain to us what we were fighting for. They have used every trick of verbal felicity. And they have never succeeded in satisfying most of us. (How the devil could they? There's only one Churchill, and no one else has the gift.) But now I had some beginnings of an idea of what it was all about. It was intangible, and incommunicable in speech or writing, but I had glimpsed it in the eyes of the liberated people of France, and heard it in the tones of their voices, and felt it in the warmth of their welcome. All this would pass away, and disillusionment would come in time. But I had learned from it, and I wasn't the only one.

The word "liberation," like many others, has been depreciated in value by overmuch familiarity. It has suffered from the slings and arrows of German propaganda and from the badinage—always ironical, half-kindly, half-bitter, and frequently humorous—of the common soldier, who, officer or other rank, is not a man to be put upon by abstract words, for which he has scant respect.

But for me, and for most of those who have been lucky enough to liberate, it still means a lot. It still counts as one of the pleasanter parts of one's education.

The shadows were growing longer on the sand, as we returned to the embarkation point. The evening star emerged, and a new moon began to glimmer faintly. The vehicles swarmed into the L.S.T. We stood and watched them, still silent. The sound of the men's voices died away. The tide started to rise.

"Come on," I said to Roger, "this is where we came in."

AIDE-de-CAMP'S LIBRARY

Accn. No.....

1. Books may be retained for a period not exceeding fifteen days.